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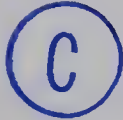




THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

COMUS AND THE PROBLEM OF SYNERGISM

by



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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled COMUS AND THE PROBLEM OF SYNERGISM, submitted by Walter V. Schienbein in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.





## ABSTRACT

In this thesis Milton's Comus is examined in the context of the theological and moral problems involved in the doctrine of synergism. Milton's fusion of classical and Christian ideas is seen as an attempt to reconcile the two traditionally antithetical views of man's condition: the classical-humanist concept of self-realization and the Judeo-Christian emphasis upon the fall of man and his need of redemption. The first chapter deals with some of the problems inherent in this approach, while the second attempts to relate these problems to some of the questions raised by the critics with respect to the form and content of the poem. In the final chapter, the doctrine of synergism is expressed in terms of the principle of the progressive integration of nature and grace, as developed by Professor A.S.P. Woodhouse in his article "The Argument of Milton's Comus." Woodhouse's theological reading of the poem sees grace as the predominant factor in the synergistic process, as contrasted with Sears Jayne's philosophical approach, with its emphasis upon nature and man's innate ability to work out his own salvation. The latter would appear to be Milton's emphasis.



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## INTRODUCTION

The history of literary criticism on Comus in the twentieth century can be divided roughly into two periods: pre-Woodhouse and post-Woodhouse. Before Woodhouse we note particularly such scholars as Denis Saurat and Paul Phelps-Morand, both of whom regarded Comus as essentially non-Christian in meaning. In 1941, however, Professor A.S.P. Woodhouse<sup>1</sup> was to come forward with an entirely new and different view, an interpretation which is based on the premise that the poem is fundamentally Christian and cannot be properly understood unless it is read in theological terms. According to this reading, the poem becomes an allegory of the Christian doctrine of grace, in which the Lady, who stands for the purity of the human soul, is able to resist the temptations of Comus (sensuality) by relying on her own powers but cannot free herself completely from the effects of his power without the help of Sabrina (divine grace).

Woodhouse's theological interpretation has generally been recognized as a major breakthrough in the efforts being made by various scholars to determine more precisely the meaning of this rather enigmatic work and to find some kind of underlying pattern and unifying principle in both Milton's





ideology and his tectonics. However, the critics do not appear to be completely satisfied with Woodhouse's explanation, though they generally are quite willing to acknowledge that his approach is basically sound. Sears Jayne,<sup>2</sup> for example, notes the fact that religious implications and theological overtones are unquestionably present in Comus. Nevertheless, even a theological reading, he says, "leaves many important elements of the masque unclear" and, what is more significant, "does not account well for the elaborate philosophical equipage of the masque." In Jayne's view, it is this philosophical element which holds the key to the real meaning of the poem. And the real meaning is that "the achievement of chastity which Milton is talking about is the soul's achievement, not God's. Milton's emphasis is . . . humanistic rather than Augustinian."<sup>3</sup> Jayne does not, however, want to be understood as meaning that the achievement of chastity is solely and exclusively its own. He explains his position in the following words:

The two emphases of the Christian relation between man and God are expressed in the two sayings: "God helps those who help themselves," and "No one rises to heaven except those whom God himself raises" (John vi.44). Mr. Woodhouse sees Milton as preferring the latter emphasis; in my reading Milton prefers the former. This is not to say, of course, that Mr. Woodhouse denies the necessity of virtue to grace in Milton's theology.<sup>4</sup>

Most critics agree with Jayne and also with Woodhouse



that both elements, the human and the divine, work together in bringing about the soul's ascent to God. Theologians use the term "synergism" to describe this process of interaction and co-operation between the human will and divine grace. This doctrine provides the basic motif and dynamic for the development of the masque and is woven into virtually every aspect of the thought and action.

But what kind of synergism is it which we see operating in Comus? Is it theocentric, as advocated by Woodhouse, or anthropocentric, as proposed by Jayne? Or to put the question in another way: How much does the Lady do on her own to obtain "the crown that Virtue gives", and how much is done by God through the various agencies that come to the Lady's help?

To deal with this question adequately, it will be necessary first of all to consider the theological and moral problems inherent in the poem in the context of the historical development of the doctrine of synergism and the implications of this doctrine. Then an attempt will be made to relate the theological issues to some of the more important questions which ever since the time of Dr. Samuel Johnson critics have been asking about the form and content of the poem. This will be followed in the final chapter by an evaluation of the approach used and the conclusions reached by Professor



Woodhouse in his brilliant analysis of the meaning of Comus as presented in his essay entitled "The Argument of Milton's Comus."







## CHAPTER I

### THE THEOLOGICAL AND MORAL PROBLEMS IN COMUS

#### 1

Comus has been read in a number of different ways: as a document reflecting Milton's moral, artistic, and intellectual development; as an answer to libertine doctrines of the time; as a Puritan sermon; as a poem revealing Milton's own inner conflict between reason and desire; and as the expression of the good life from the point of view of a Christian humanist. At one stage or another, all of these different approaches are faced with the necessity of coming to grips with the theological and moral problems inherent in the poem. Underlying all of these is the basic problem of synergism, the doctrine which asserts that the human will co-operates with divine grace in the regeneration, sanctification, and ultimate salvation of the Christian individual. Closely related to this doctrine are the principles and tenets of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. In order to understand and appreciate the central importance of the problem of synergism in Comus, we shall have to trace the historical development of this doctrine from the time of St. Augustine in the fifth century



to the period of the Reformation, when the term "synergism", as a theological concept, first came into use.

The question concerning the role of divine grace in the life of the Christian is one which has engaged the attention of theologians from earliest times down to the present day. In general, the Church Fathers agreed that man's nature had become depraved as a result of the Fall and that this condition cannot be remedied except through the direct intervention of divine grace. But while some taught a total depravity and the complete loss of free will in matters pertaining to the spirit, others contended that postlapsarian man has retained at least a remnant of free will, which is active toward the good independently of the operation of grace. The fifth century was to bring out this vexing question into full discussion, with St. Augustine and his disciples on the one hand, stressing the complete inability of fallen man to make even the slightest contribution toward his salvation, and Pelagius and his adherents on the other, rejecting the notion of man's total depravity and the loss of freedom of the will.

Pelagius's theological views were in some respects closely related to the philosophical ideas popularized by the Stoics in the two or three centuries immediately preceding the beginning of the Christian era. Stoicism, as a system of thought, was deeply rooted in the Greek view of man as a





creature who must work out his own destiny as best he can, without relying on any outside help. The Stoics held that the moral strength of man's will, when steeled by asceticism, is sufficient in itself to desire and attain the loftiest ideals of virtuous living. The supreme aim in life is virtue or living in harmony with nature; and nature, for the Stoics, was simply another word for divine providence or the rational principle of order, law, and system operating in the universe. Morality consists in living in conformity with this rational principle, for it is in the very nature of things to do that which is in conformity with law and order. In the Stoic scheme of values, the greatest virtues are practical wisdom, bravery, temperance, and justice. What distinguishes an ethically good man from a bad one is the fact that the virtuous person strives to bring his life into more complete harmony with the rational principle. Right reason is reason in harmony with nature. Every man has been created a rational being, and as such, has inherent in his very nature the capacity to conform to the eternal laws of right and wrong.

Pelagius borrowed the Stoic notion of man's self-sufficiency and placed it into a Christian context. He saw a real danger, morally speaking, in the concept of free grace and of the total depravity of the human heart, in that, in his view, this doctrine appeared to provide man with a





perfectly legitimate excuse for his immoral actions. If man has been predestined to depravity and can do nothing through his own power to change his condition, then why should he be faulted for living a sinful life? Pelagius sought to counter-act this view and insisted, therefore, much more strongly than other teachers of the Church before him, on the existence of natural moral powers in fallen man. The Stoic idea that man has the power and the responsibility to work out his own salvation thus provided Pelagius with the basic principle pervading his entire approach to his interpretation of the Christian doctrines concerning man, grace, and salvation. In line with this principle, Pelagius held that fallen human nature is not depraved but is still in its original state, a state of indifference morally, without virtue and vice and capable of both; and it depends solely on the will of the individual to develop the moral germs of his nature and be saved. In the words of Pelagius:

Everything good and everything evil, in respect of which we are either worthy of praise or of blame, is done by us, not born in us. We are not born in our full development, but with a capacity for good and evil; we are begotten as well without virtue as without vice, and before the activity of our own personal will there is nothing in man but what God has stored in him.<sup>1</sup>

Pelagius's views sparked a theological controversy which was to continue throughout the entire history of the Christian Church and is still very much alive today. In the



initial period of this controversy, it was St. Augustine who, more than any other theologian, repudiated Pelagianism in toto and insisted that fallen man is completely helpless in spiritual matters and must rely solely on the grace of God for redemption and salvation. Augustine taught that all men since the Fall are totally depraved in body and soul. From this state they can be rescued only by the grace of God revealed in and through Christ. This grace of God attracts the degenerate will of man with inner conquering necessity, and whoever yields to the power of divine grace is saved. However, not all men respond to the grace of God; but out of mankind, equally corrupt in all its individuals, God, according to his compassion in Christ, elects some to salvation, fitting them thereto by kindling saving faith in them by his grace. All the others God, according to his justice, leaves in their lost state. The reason that grace is accorded only to a part of humanity can be sought solely in the eternal, holy, inscrutable, absolutely free decree of God.

Augustine's theological views dominated the thinking of the Christian Church, particularly in the West, for a considerable period of time. However, his doctrine of the total depravity of man and the primacy of divine grace did not remain unchallenged for long. It soon had to be defended against new foes, the Semi-Pelagians. While the Pelagians





held that free will, or man's natural capacity to make free moral choices, is in no wise impaired, the Semi-Pelagians taught that man's free will is only partially impaired, needing the assistance of divine grace - salvation thus depending on grace as well as the right use of man's natural capacity for virtuous actions. The Semi-Pelagians argued that the reason why some are saved while others are not is that some make the right use of their natural powers while others do not. Despite postlapsarian man's propensity to make wrong moral choices, he can nevertheless accept the good when it is offered to him but needs God's grace to help him develop this capacity. Thus divine grace and free will co-operate in bringing about man's salvation throughout his entire life, from the moment of his regeneration to his ultimate glorification.

Despite the fact that the position of the Semi-Pelagians was attacked from various quarters, it became strongly entrenched in ecclesiastical circles and represented, in effect, the accepted doctrinal position of the Christian Church throughout the Middle Ages. Indeed, it can be safely said that the entire Semi-Pelagian movement clearly illustrates the efforts of the medieval Church to effect a synthesis of and a reconciliation between the two traditional, but diametrically opposed, views with regard to the human



condition - the classical Stoic position on the one hand, and the Pauline-Augustinian view on the other. Out of these efforts to reconcile these two antithetical positions, there emerged the concept of synergism, the idea that man and God co-operate in the scheme of salvation.

Though classical philosophers held differing and even conflicting views on the question of man's condition as a moral being, they were nevertheless in general agreement in regarding man as a self-sufficient being who must rely on himself and his own resources to attain the good. Opposed to this was the Pauline-Augustinian view that man is completely helpless and must rely solely on God. The central problem for Thomas Aquinas and the Church of the Middle Ages was to find some middle ground on which the Christian and the classical, the religious and the natural modes of thought, could be integrated. For the classical mind, man contained in himself, at his best, the necessary ingredients for as good and as successful a life as could be conceived. For the Christian, man was, in Augustine's words, "crooked, sordid, bespotted, and ulcerous" - at once helpless and depraved.

In attempting to work out a synthesis of these two opposed views, Thomas Aquinas began by explaining the difference between philosophy and theology. Philosophy is what can be analyzed and demonstrated by the natural light of reason.





Theology is whatever rests on faith and revelation. Thomas held that theology does not oppose philosophy but serves to perfect and complete it. Reason and faith are therefore inseparably involved in man's search for truth. Faith serves to perfect reason, and reason serves to illuminate theology. In the words of Thomas,

Sacred doctrine makes use even of human reason, not, indeed, to prove faith (for thereby the merit of faith would come to an end), but to make clear other things that are put forward in this doctrine. Since therefore grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas's thesis was that nature is perfected by grace, that the classical view of man, as postulated by Aristotle, for example, is right as far as it goes; but it does not go far enough. In other words, Thomas did not reject the classical view of man but said that this view needs to be completed and perfected by illuminating it with the revelation of Christian truth. In the light of this revealed truth, man is found to be much more than the natural being Aristotle supposed him to be. He is also a child of God. As such, he has another and a higher end - loyalty and obedience to God, his Maker and Redeemer. Aristotle's conception of God as the summit of the hierarchy of substance, as pure actuality, pure activity, pure intelligence, is quite acceptable as far as it goes. But there are deeper truths about the divine nature



which were inaccessible to Aristotle but which God has revealed in the Scriptures. God is not only the metaphysical perfection the classical mind conceived him to be. He is also a creative providence, an exacting ruler, a loving father. But, once again, these higher insights do not contradict what unaided reason discloses. Hence, the demands of reason are not denied; they are satisfied even while being transcended.

In his discussion of man's moral nature, Thomas begins with the principle that there is such a thing as eternal law, and that this law is God's decree for the governance of the whole universe. All things obey the eternal law, for the pattern of their behavior is nothing but a reflection of this law. The precepts of God's law are imprinted on man's mind, and this law may therefore quite correctly be called natural law or natural religion. Man's conscience or right reason informs him what he ought to do. Thus there is a wide range of virtues of which man is capable simply by following the dictates of right reason. Fortitude, justice, temperance, friendship - these are the chief natural virtues, which constitute the perfection of man in his natural, unregenerate state.

However, the attainment of these virtues is not enough to perfect man's highest nature nor produce the beatitude





that is his final end. For the realization of his supernatural end, other virtues are required - the Pauline theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity. While the natural virtues can be acquired, at least in some degree, by our own efforts, the theological virtues are supernaturally infused and depend entirely on God's gift.

The picture, then, that emerges from this examination of Thomas's ethics is that of man as a twofold creature. On the one hand, he is a rational being capable of choosing his ends and acting on them. The good life at this level consists in developing certain moral and intellectual virtues to the fullest possible degree within his capacity to do so. On the other hand, as an immortal soul made in God's image, man has a higher end - beatitude. Realization of this end, which depends not on ourselves but on God, is not to be achieved in this world. We can approach it, however, by way of the three theological virtues which God's grace bestows. These ends, Thomas maintains, are not in any sense rivals. Attainment of the former, which is within our power, is the basis and preparation for the attainment of the latter, which is simply the former transmuted to a higher degree.

The Semi-Pelagian and synergistic position enunciated by Thomas, though modified in some respects by later theologians, became the official teaching of the Roman Catholic



Church in the Middle Ages and is still, in essence, the position of that church body today. Original sin, according to this view, has weakened and deflected, but not entirely destroyed, the freedom of the will. The Council of Trent of the sixteenth century reaffirmed this position by stating:

Whereas all men had lost their innocence in the prevarication of Adam, having become unclean, . . . free-will, attenuated as it was in its powers, and bent down, was by no means extinguished in them.

If any one saith, that, since Adam's sin, the free-will of man is lost and extinguished; . . . let him be anathema.<sup>3</sup>

The doctrine that original sin is not a total corruption of the entire human nature, but merely the loss of certain supernatural qualities by which man is able to check his desires, implies the acceptance of the Semi-Pelagian view that man is able to co-operate with God in working out his salvation. And, of course, this is precisely what is meant by synergism.

The Reformation marked the emergence of a conception of man's relation to God that was essentially a return to the position taken by Augustine, who ruled out entirely the possibility of man's ability to make even the slightest contribution towards his salvation. The leaders in this movement were, of course, Luther and Calvin. Luther had been oppressed, as Augustine had, by the appalling gulf that separates fallen





man from the perfection of God. How could sinful man achieve union with God? Luther himself had tried in every conceivable manner, and he had failed. He now realized that it was the most damnable pride to suppose that man had the power to save himself or to accomplish anything by his good works which might merit God's favor. Calvin's position in this regard was, for the most part, very much the same as Luther's, with the result that on the continent the Reformation, in terms of the doctrinal issues involved, was characterized by an unequivocal commitment to Augustinian monergism as opposed to Semi-Pelagian synergism.

In England, the Reformation led indirectly to the establishment of the Anglican Church; and Lutheran influence in matters of doctrine, particularly with respect to the strict Augustinian position on sin and grace, was quite strong at first. The official teachings of the Anglican Church were incorporated into the Thirty-Nine Articles; and it is interesting to note that Article IX, which deals with original sin, reflects a tendency toward the Semi-Pelagian view, which holds that man has within his nature a spark of goodness. Man is described as being "very far gone from original righteousness and is of his own nature inclined to evil."<sup>4</sup> The ambivalent wording of this statement provided the wedge needed by those among the Anglican theologians and clerics who were



synergists rather than monergists at heart.

It would seem, on the face of it, to be a rather far-fetched notion to attempt to relate the issues involved in the theological controversy that we have been examining to Milton's Comus. However, we need to keep in mind that in the sixteenth century, as well as in the first half of the seventeenth century, religious issues and theological debate, far from being a special interest on the periphery of literature, were at its very center. The greatest literary masterpiece of the seventeenth century, Milton's Paradise Lost, illustrates this fact very clearly. Religious themes and the problems of human life with which religion and theology have traditionally concerned themselves engaged the profoundest thinking of the most intellectually gifted men of the time. Such terms as "original sin," "predestination," "effectual grace," and such names as Augustine and Pelagius were commonplaces in Milton's day. The story of the Fall was regarded as the greatest tragedy in human history. The endless debates on the significance and implications of this catastrophe were not mere academic hairsplitting, for any estimate of the nature and destiny of man depended on an interpretation of the Fall. Adam's fall into sin, as A.E. Davidson points out, was a persistent theme for preachers, a favorite source for poetic imagery, the subject of nine years of divinity lectures





by the Lady Margaret Professor of Cambridge, Dr. Samuel Ward. Anglican divines fought with their Puritan brethren on questions concerning Church government and worship and on doctrinal matters involved in the problem of predestination, but High Churchmen and Puritans agreed in their melancholy view of the condition of human nature, in their reading of Adam's story.<sup>5</sup>

## 2

The conflict between Anglican and Puritan theology in Milton's day was largely the result of differences in the interpretation of certain traditional doctrines of the Christian faith. Anglicans and Puritans alike were motivated by a desire to give all glory to God alone in the matter of man's salvation. But the Puritans insisted that this could not be properly done without divesting man of every vestige of goodness, virtue, and dignity. Man must be utterly condemned as totally depraved and corrupt in body and soul if God's boundless grace and mercy is to be seen in all its glory and plenitude. The Calvinist emphasis upon the sovereignty of God as contrasted with the worthlessness and helplessness of man was the central tenet of Puritan belief and the dynamic of the Puritan mode of thought and life. The Anglicans, on the other hand, felt that it is possible to glorify God aright without necessarily debasing man. For how can we say that we are honoring and glorifying God if we regard man, the crowning





achievement of God's creative power, with such scorn and contempt?

Despite the differences in approach, interpretation, and viewpoint between Anglicans and Puritans, there was, nevertheless, basic agreement on the fundamental doctrines of traditional Christian theology. The Holy Scriptures were accepted as God's Word in which he reveals himself to man in his threefold manifestation as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. As Creator, he has in the person of the Father brought all things into being and is the source, the giver, and the preserver of all life. As Redeemer, he has in the person of Jesus Christ made full and perfect atonement for the sins of fallen mankind and thus effected man's reconciliation with God. As Sanctifier, he is continually at work in the person of the Holy Spirit in calling men out of the darkness of unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ, and in helping them to overcome all temptations and to persevere in the saving faith to the end. It is within this general frame of reference that the ideology of Comus will be examined; and in order to do this in as systematic and orderly a way as possible, we shall follow the outline as given above in terms of the threefold manifestation of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

To begin with, it is worth noting that there are remarkably few passages in Comus in which distinctively



Christian terminology is used as contrasted with the extensive mythological and Platonic allusions and references. This need not unduly disturb us if we keep in mind the genre and the occasion of the poem as well as the allegorical method employed. As C.S. Lewis points out in another context,

The practice of using mythological forms to hint theological truths was well established and lasted as late as the composition of Comus. It is, for most poets and in most poems, by far the best method of writing poetry which is religious without being devotional - that is, without being an act of worship to the reader. In the medieval allegories and the renaissance masks, God, if we may say so without irreverence, appears frequently, but always incognito. Everyone understood what was happening, but the occasion remained an imaginative, not a devotional, one. The poet thus retains liberties which would be denied him if he removed the veil.<sup>6</sup>

Nowhere in Comus do we find the term "God" used, but there are numerous veiled references to him in the use of such expressions as "Jove," "Nature," "Heav'n," "the Supreme good," "Providence," and "Th'all-giver." Moreover, the influence of God upon the action of the masque is emphasized again and again. The Attendant Spirit explains in the Prologue that he has been sent by "Sovran Jove" to defend and guard the Lady and her brothers (ll. 41-42). When at length he presents them to their parents, he says, "Heav'n hath timely tri'd their youth" (l. 970). The Lady, lost in the wood, is confident that "the Supreme good" will come to her aid, if necessary (ll. 217-219). The Younger Brother exclaims, "Heav'n





keep my sister!" (l. 486). The Elder Brother says, "Heav'n be for us." (l. 489). The Lady explains to Comus that he cannot hurt her even though for the moment "Heav'n sees good" that she remain helpless (l. 665). When at last the Lady is released by Sabrina, the Attendant Spirit urges her to flee "while Heaven lends us grace" (l. 938).

It is clear from the expressions that are used with reference to God and from the context in which they are found that the God of Comus is to be viewed as a personal being who shows a fatherly concern for his creatures and provides for their welfare. Even Comus himself professes to share this view. In his debate with the Lady he speaks in glowing terms of "Th'all-giver" and of "Nature" pouring "her bounties forth with such a full and unwithdrawing hand." In all this it is not difficult to see a close affinity with the Christian concept of God as Creator, who in the person of the Father brought all things into being and shows a providential concern for his creatures.

However, this fact in itself does not yet by any means make the theology of Comus Christian in the orthodox sense. To see God in the poem as the Creator and Preserver is not enough. We must, above all else, see him as the Redeemer and Savior, who in the person of Jesus Christ came into the world to suffer and die for the sins of fallen mankind. The





traditional doctrinal position of the Anglican Church on the fall of man and his redemption through Christ reflects in essence the Pauline-Augustinian view of man and his relationship to God; and it is this view which throughout the time of the Reformation down to the middle of the seventeenth century was generally regarded as synonymous with orthodox Christian theology. Article II of the Thirty-Nine Articles of The Church of England speaks of Christ as

very God and very Man; who truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, to reconcile His Father to us, and to be a sacrifice not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men.<sup>7</sup>

Article IX defines original sin as

the fault and corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness and of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world it deserveth God's wrath and damnation.<sup>8</sup>

The Augustinian interpretation of the Fall, as A.E.

Davidson points out, "was familiar to the seventeenth-century Englishman not only through the Anglican Articles but also through the sermons or homilies appointed to be read in the churches in the time of Queen Elizabeth and thundered from the pulpits in the early seventeenth century."<sup>9</sup> One of these reads in part:

For in ourselves (as of ourselves) we find nothing, whereby we may be delivered from this miserable captivity, into the



which we were cast, through the envy of the devil, by breaking God's commandment in our first parent Adam. So we are all become unclean; but we are not able to cleanse ourselves, more to make one another of us clean. We are by nature the children of God's wrath: but we are not able to make ourselves the children and inheritors of God's glory. We are sheep that run astray: but we cannot of our own power come again to the sheepfold, so great is our imperfection and weakness. In ourselves therefore may we not glory, which, of ourselves, are nothing but sinful: neither may we rejoice in any works that we do, which all be so unperfect and unpure, that they are not able to stand before the righteous judgment-seat of God.<sup>10</sup>

However, Christ has redeemed man by suffering and dying on the Cross, thus satisfying God's justice. What man in his lost and fallen condition could not do, Christ has done for him. By believing in Christ, man is declared righteous in the sight of God:

And this justification or righteousness, which we so receive of God's mercy and Christ's merits, embraced by faith, is taken, accepted, and allowed of God, for our full and perfect justification. For the more full understanding hereof, it is our parts and duties ever to remember the great mercy of God, how that (all the world being wrapped in sin by breaking of the law) God sent His only Son our Saviour Christ into this world, to fulfil the law for us, and by shedding of His most precious blood, to make a sacrifice and satisfaction, or (as it may be called) amends to His Father for our sins, to assuage His wrath and indignation conceived against us for the same.<sup>11</sup>

The theology of Puritanism on the fall of man and his need of redemption through Christ was much more pessimistic than that of Anglicanism. Article IX of the Thirty-Nine Articles refers to man in his fallen state as being "very far gone from original righteousness," thus implying that while the Fall had indeed severely wounded man with sin, not every





faculty for good had been crushed out of him. Calvin, on the other hand, emphasizes the totality of man's perversion and depravity:

The mind of man is so completely alienated from the righteousness of God that it conceives, desires, and undertakes every thing that is impious, perverse, base, impure, and flagitious; that his heart is so thoroughly infected by the poison of sin, that it cannot produce any thing but what is corrupt and that if at any time men do any thing apparently good, yet the mind always remains involved in hypocrisy and falacious obliquity, and the heart enslaved by its inward perverseness.<sup>12</sup>

In another passage he says:

Those who have defined original sin as a privation of the original righteousness, which we ought to possess, though they comprise the whole of the subject, yet have not used language sufficiently expressive of its operation and influence. For our nature is not only destitute of all good, but is so fertile in all evils that it cannot remain inactive. Those who have called it concupiscence have used an expression not improper, if it were only added, which is far from being conceded by most persons, that every thing in man, the understanding and the will, the soul and body, is polluted and engrossed by the concupiscence; or, to express it more briefly, that man is of himself nothing else but concupiscence.<sup>13</sup>

Like Calvin, William Perkins, the most outstanding Puritan theologian of Milton's time, believed in man's total corruption:

Original sin is nothing else, but a disorder or evil disposition in all the faculties and inclinations of men, whereby they are all carried inordinately against the law of God. The subject or place of this sin, is not any part of man, but the whole body and soul. For first of all, the natural appetite to meat and drink, and the power of nourishing is greatly corrupted. . . . Secondly, the outward senses are as corrupt. . . . Thirdly, touching the understanding, the spirit of God sayeth, that the frame of the heart of man is only evil continually: so we are not able of our selves to think a good thought.<sup>14</sup>





By reducing man to a state of complete depravity and spiritual impotence, Puritan theology could all the more effectively glorify and exalt the inestimable grace and mercy of God as manifested in the act of redemption. Man's response to this redeeming grace, if it is to merit God's blessing and favor, must be one of profound humility and gratitude. All pride, arrogance, and vanity must be driven out of the heart and mind, for these sins are at the very root of man's depraved condition. To quote Calvin:

Man cannot assume to himself even the least particle beyond his just right, without ruining himself with vain confidence, and incurring the guilt of enormous sacrilege, by transferring to himself the honour which belongs to God. And whenever our minds are pestered with cupidity, to desire to have something of our own, which may reside in ourselves rather than in God, we may know that the idea is suggested by the same counsellor, who excited in our first parents the desire of resembling "gods, knowing good and evil."<sup>15</sup>

If we turn now to Comus and survey the world as the Attendant Spirit describes it in the Prologue, we find that it is a "Sin-worn mold", where the vast majority of mankind succumb to the allurements and temptations of the forces of wickedness, as epitomized in the person of Comus. "For most do taste through fond intemperate thirst," we are told, of the seducer's "orient liquor." The Spirit goes on to describe the disastrous effect that this liquor has upon those who drink it:



Soon as the Potion works, their human count'nance,  
 Th' express resemblance of the gods, is chang'd  
 Into some brutish form of Wolf, or Bear,  
 Or Ounce, or Tiger, Hog, or bearded Goat,  
 All other parts remaining as they were.  
 And they so perfect in their misery,  
 Not once perceive their foul disfigurement,  
 But boast themselves more comely than before,  
 And all their friends and native home forget,  
 To roll with pleasure in a sensual sty.

If Milton intended this passage to be read in theological terms, it can be interpreted in no other way than as a description of man in his fallen state; and a picture of greater corruption and perversion can hardly be imagined. But the most frightening aspect of the situation portrayed in this passage is that it is completely devoid of even the slightest suggestion of redemption or deliverance for those who have fallen. It almost seems as if all those who become the victims of Comus's wiles have been destined to suffer this fate. The Attendant Spirit is not in the least concerned about their misfortune. He is interested only in the "favor'd of high Jove", in those who apparently have somehow managed to resist the temptations of Comus and

by due steps aspire  
 To lay their just hands on that Golden Key  
 That opes the Palace of Eternity.

His purpose in coming into the world is not, strangely enough, to offer the hope of redemption to those who have fallen into sin but to guard and defend those who have not fallen. He







makes this quite clear when he says:

To such my errand is, and but for such,  
I would not soil these pure Ambrosial weeds  
With the rank vapors of this Sin-worn mold.

There are then, according to the Attendant Spirit, two kinds of people in the world: those who have fallen, and the favored few who have not. The fallen are those who are "unmindful of the crown that Virtue gives." They are "confined and pestered in this pinfold here", and their minds are filled with "low-thoughted care." The other class consists of the few who have "just hands." Like the Lady, they are pure in body and soul and strive by "due steps" to ascend to God. These do not need redeeming grace; the others do not want it, even if it were offered to them. They regard themselves in their fallen state to be "more comely than before." Whatever the nature of that grace is which is said to be symbolized by the Attendant Spirit, haemony, or Sabrina, it is clearly not meant for the fallen but only for the righteous. And if it is meant only for the righteous, it cannot be called grace at all except in the very general sense of a kind of favor or reward.

It is at this point that we must attempt to define as clearly as possible the various meanings of the word "grace" as it is used in Christian theology. God's grace, in the widest sense of the term, simply refers to his love, goodness,



and kindness toward mankind in bestowing natural blessings and benefits on all. In this sense, everything that man is and has is due to God's grace. However, because of his fall into sin and his total inability to save himself from the dire consequences of his fallen condition, man is in need of a special kind of grace, namely saving or redeeming grace. This grace was manifested in the act of redemption, an act whereby God himself in the person of Jesus Christ came into the world to take upon himself man's guilt and punishment and make full atonement for the sins of the world by his suffering, death, and resurrection. In order to appropriate to himself the benefits of the redemptive act, namely the forgiveness of sins, fellowship with God, and eternal life, the individual must believe in Christ and accept him as his Lord and Savior. That is, he must come to realize the terrible condition in which he finds himself by nature as a lost and sinful being, repent of his sins, and trust solely in Christ and his redemptive work for salvation. He must in true humility and penitence throw himself completely upon God's mercy in Christ, turn from his wicked ways, and strive to live in conformity with God's will by doing good works, which are the fruits of faith. The moment an individual comes to faith in Christ, he is "born again" or converted. His conversion is a





continuing process, for as long as he is still in the world, he must constantly battle against the forces of sin and evil and cannot expect to reach the goal of perfection until he has finally been translated from the Church Militant to the Church Triumphant in heaven.

However, this aspect of God's plan of salvation for man involves another kind of grace, namely sanctifying grace, which is manifested in the person of the Holy Spirit, who turns men's hearts from unbelief to faith in Christ and awakens within them the will and the desire to serve God and live according to his commandments out of love and gratitude for what God in his mercy has done for them. Moreover, this sanctifying grace is constantly at work in the heart, will, and mind of the Christian, revitalizing his spiritual life through the Word and the Sacraments and giving him new strength along the way to fight the good fight of faith so that he might finally attain to eternal life.

Let us return now to our discussion of the manner in which God's grace expresses itself in terms of his threefold manifestation as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier and relate the discussion to the various meanings of the word "grace" as indicated above. So far we have seen grace operating in the poem in only one of the three forms which we have noted, namely in the general sense of God's love and concern for all





his creatures on the natural level. As the Lord and Giver of life, he has created all things and provides for his creatures by endowing them with all of the gifts and powers which they require in order to live and survive. In this respect, man has been more highly favored than any other creature, for he possesses the power to reason, which enables him to live on a much higher level than other forms of life. However, he must take care to see that his reason remains in control of his will, passions, and desires. These, too, are good gifts which come from God, but they can become man's worst enemies if they are permitted to get out of hand. Obviously it is not God's will that we should let this happen; and it is only logical to assume that since God has given us the power to subdue the passions and hold them in check, he will also help us to use this power effectively.

However, as a result of the Fall, all of man's powers, including his reason, have become infected with sin and corruption. Man has become alienated from God and is inclined toward that which is evil rather than that which is good. To correct this situation, another form of grace was required - redeeming grace. In his great love and mercy toward fallen mankind, God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ to atone for the sins of mankind. Thus grace is inseparably bound up with the person and redemptive work of Christ. But



this is true also with reference to the person and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. For the gift of redeeming grace, which is offered to all, is received only by faith in Christ. And faith is a gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit, who leads men to acknowledge Christ as their Redeemer and thus creates within them a new, spiritual life, which seeks to express itself in works of love toward God and man.

Denis Saurat states quite categorically: "There is little that is Christian about Comus."<sup>16</sup> This precisely is the dilemma in which we find ourselves if we attempt to read the poem in the context of the theological climate of Milton's time, a time when the Pauline-Augustinian view of man and his relationship to God dominated Protestant thought and life. Redeeming and sanctifying grace was at the very heart and centre of this theology, but we find no trace of this kind of grace in Comus. For the plain fact is that the Lady does not fall, and where there is no fall, there is no need for grace in the distinctively Christian sense. The whole structure of orthodox Christian theology is based on the concepts of sin, redemption, and grace. This is not the theology which we find in Comus. What we find, instead, is a system of religious thought which, for want of a better term, we may simply describe as Platonic theology or, more correctly, Platonic idealism.







The close affinity between certain elements of Platonic and Christian thought was clearly recognized, of course, already in the earliest period of the Christian era. The distinctive character of Platonism lies in its emphasis upon the supersensuous world and the importance of elevating consciousness into the world of spirit. Like Christianity, it stresses eternal values, the things pertaining to God. It is true, of course, that Plato's idea of God or of the Good cannot be equated with the Christian concept of God. Nevertheless, it is possible to see in passages such as the following a theological basis for his moral and ethical thought:

Evils, Theodorus, can never perish; for there must always remain something which is antagonist to good. Of necessity, they hover around this mortal sphere and the earthly nature, having no place among the gods in heaven. Wherefore, also, we ought to fly away thither, and to fly thither is to become like God, as far as this is possible; and to become like him, is to become holy and just and wise.<sup>17</sup>

Speaking of the soul, Plato says:

God gave this as a genius to each one, . . . to raise us like plants, not of an earthly but of an heavenly growth, from earth to our kindred which is in heaven.<sup>18</sup>

Basil Willey has found a number of points of similarity between Platonism and Christian thought on such matters as the immortality of the soul, the future state of rewards and punishments, the conflict between the flesh and the spirit, the yearning of the soul for deliverance from its earthly



bondage, the blessedness of purity and of suffering for righteousness' sake, and so on. "In the most general terms," he suggests, "it may be said that Plato's whole system is religious in character, if by 'religious' we imply a strong conviction of the reality of the unseen and eternal, and a passionate desire so to live as to rescue the soul finally from its clayey lodging, and present it unspotted before its judge hereafter."<sup>19</sup>

However, Plato's religious thought, Willey goes on to explain, lacks the dynamic of traditional Christian theology as developed by St. Paul because it knows nothing of redemption and regeneration through faith in Christ. Paul's great discovery, Willey says,

was that neither intellectual enlightenment nor moral self-discipline will of themselves produce religious regeneration. We must be born again; we must die with Christ and be raised again with him; die to our old, natural selves and live anew in the spirit; whoever is in Christ has become a new creature.<sup>20</sup>

In elaborating further on the essential difference between Platonism and Christianity, Willey goes on to say:

He [Paul] has discovered a new secret of living, which had been hidden from the Greeks. What secret? Surely a principle which even we, without being profoundly versed in spiritual experience . . . can verify in our own way: The pursuit of culture, including wisdom and righteousness, the pursuit of self-realization as an end in itself, does not fulfil expectations. It produces either pride, or boredom, or both, and in either case leads to frustration. In place, then, of the old culture of self-effort and self-dilation, Christianity teaches a new technique of salvation, which begins in repentance and humility. It teaches that of ourselves we can do and avail nothing; it is grace, a power coming upon us from God, that





perfects us, not realization of self . . . St. Augustine even condemns our best virtues as "splendid vices" unless they come from faith and are referred to God. . . .

. . . Not only does Christianity thus teach us to take God, not ourselves, as centre, and to substitute realization of him for realization of the self: it also offers us, in place of the ceaseless striving of man towards God, a God who comes to meet us . . . The Christian view, let us provisionally say, is that the gulf between God and fallen man is too great for man to cross by his own strength, so that all his efforts must be but Icarus-flights; God, however, in his mercy and love, has taken the initiative; he was in Christ reconciling man to himself, and man can be redeemed by the divine grace thus offered and mediated. And so Faith becomes the first Christian duty: faith in what God has done for man in Christ. Faith is what justifies, because it is a submergence of the self in God, a submission of the will to God's will; it thus reverses and annuls the original sinfulness of man, which has always consisted in the rebellion of the separate will seeking its own ends, its own wisdom and its own righteousness. Faith so conceived, moreover, namely as the voluntary submission of the will to God, is by definition inclusive of "good works". Faith without works is dead, as St. James and Piers Plowman assure us; but that is because it is not genuine. Works, however good in themselves, which do not proceed from saving faith, tend towards vainglory, and so become tainted with human corruption.<sup>21</sup>

In summing up his discussion of the unique character of Christian theology as contrasted with the idea of Platonic self-realization, Willey calls attention to the importance of making a clear distinction between Christianity conceived merely as a system of ethics and Christianity in the orthodox Pauline sense as a completely new way of life:

Probably the most important point to grasp in comparing Christianity with Greek morality is that Christianity is not in itself a system of ethical teachings - or rather, it is much more than that. True, one can talk about "Christian ethics", and there are of course certain virtues which are





especially associated with Christianity, notably loving-kindness, mercy, humility, forgiveness, purity, and all the qualities praised in the Beatitudes and by St. Paul. But the essential point remains, that for Christianity morality is not enough. Merely as ethics, Christianity contains little or nothing that is distinctive - little that cannot be paralleled in non-Christian teachings. The "righteousness" of Christianity is not ethical; it comes by grace through repentance and faith: faith itself being a supra-rational act of the will, not an assent to rational demonstration. The "justice" of Plato is not the same as the "Righteousness" of the New Testament, though δικαιοσύνη is the Greek word for both. Justice is a natural and secular virtue; it can be defined in purely ethical terms as the harmony of the soul, the proper order of the social hierarchy, the giving to each man his due, etc. New Testament Righteousness is a state of regeneration granted by the grace of God to the repentant sinner, and having good works as a bye-product.<sup>22</sup>

In his study of the influence of Plato on Milton's thought, Herbert Agar calls attention to four passages in Comus in which he finds ideas that are very closely related to those expressed by Plato: lines 18-21, 111-116, 381-385, and 420-480. In connection with the third of the four passages cited, Agar quotes the following from the Republic:

"Then this must be our notion of the just man, that even when he is in poverty or sickness, or any other seeming misfortune, all things will in the end work together for good to him in life and death. . . . And of the unjust may not the opposite be assumed? Certainly!"<sup>23</sup>

Agar's comments on the fourth passage, which deals with the invincible power of chastity, are particularly illuminating:

Throughout this exaltation of chastity, it is probable that Milton has Plato in mind. My reasons for assuming this are as follows:





1. Milton greatly admired and was much influenced by, Plato's writings on the subject of chastity. cf. An Apology for Smectymnuus, P.W., iii, 119: "Riper years and the ceaseless round of study and reading led me to the shady spaces of philosophy; but chiefly to the divine volumes of Plato, and his equal Xenophon: where, if I should tell ye what I learnt of chastity and love. . . ."

2. The passage contains thirteen lines (463-75) which are almost a literal translation from the Phaedo, 81.

3. In the middle of the passage (438-40) come the lines:  
 "Do ye beleeve me yet, or shall I call  
 Antiquity from the old Schools of Greece  
 To testify the arms of Chastity?"

Plato, especially as interpreted by the Renaissance Platonists, was the most prominent advocate of chastity in the "old Schools of Greece".<sup>24</sup>

Milton conceives of chastity as the purity of the soul. He speaks of it as one of the "abstracted sublimities" which he has learned from Plato. The idea which forms the basis of Milton's development of his doctrine of chastity is the one taught in the Phaedo, that the purity of the soul is contaminated and gradually reduced to the lower, corporeal form of the body when exposed to the experiences gained through sense knowledge:

And were we not saying long ago that the soul, when using the body as an instrument of perception, that is to say, when using the sense of sight or hearing or some other sense (for the meaning of perceiving through the body is perceiving through the senses) - were we not saying that the soul too is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders and is confused; the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard, when under their influence? . . . But the soul which has been polluted, and is impure at the time of her departure, and is the companion and servant of the body always, . . . do you suppose that such a soul as this





will depart pure and unalloyed? . . . She is engrossed by the corporeal, which the continual association and constant care of the body have made natural to her. . . . And this, my friend, may be conceived to be that heavy, weighty, earthy element of sight by which such a soul is depressed and dragged down again into the visible world, . . . prowling about tombs and sepulchres, in the neighborhood of which, as they tell us, are seen certain ghostly apparitions of souls which have not departed pure, but are cloyed with sight and therefore visible.<sup>25</sup>

This, then, is the condition of the soul when it yields to the degrading influences of the world of sense experience. Like the victims of Comus's cup, the soul loses its divine resemblance and becomes earthy and corrupt. The Lady, however, refuses the cup. She does not permit her soul to become infected with the perverting effects of sensuality. She keeps her eyes fixed steadily on that "unblemished form of Chastity". It is in this very act of the contemplation of the ideal, the contemplative love of the beauty of goodness and virtue, that the Lady is able to preserve the purity of her soul and rise above the corrupting influences of her environment.

The Platonic vision of the ascent of the soul through the contemplation of the ideals of virtue and purity appears to be the informing principle of Milton's ideology in Comus. In this system of "salvation" there is little room for the notion of divine grace in the strictly theological sense of traditional Christianity. It is rather in the context of the opening lines of the poem that Milton's ideas are to be



understood. And, as A.E. Dyson points out, "The phrasing here is Platonic, and Platonic thinking is at the root of all Milton's theology, deeper than his Evangelicalism, deeper than his Puritanism. Behind these opening words of the Spirit is the belief that Virtue is Knowledge, and that an unclouded understanding is both the condition of Virtue, and its reward."<sup>26</sup>

In Comus, to use the words of J.S. Harrison, Platonic idealism triumphs over Christian theology.

According to Plato the soul may realize perfect sufficiency of itself, it is self-sufficient; but Christian theology taught the necessity of a heavenly grace for man to work out his own salvation. The two ideals are thus distinct; and though the English poets incorporate both in their work, the line of cleavage is distinctly visible, and the doctrine of grace plays no more than a formal part in their exposition of the soul's growth.<sup>27</sup>





## CHAPTER II

### AN EXAMINATION OF THE FORM AND CONTENT OF COMUS

What kind of poem is Comus? Milton called it a masque. The actual title which he gave the poem is "A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle." However, critics generally, from the time of Dr. Samuel Johnson, have been reluctant to recognize it as a proper masque in the accepted sense of the term; and some even go so far as to question whether it can be called a masque at all. Johnson calls it a "drama in the epic style, inelegantly splendid and tediously instructive." It is not a masque, he points out, because it is not "given up to all the freaks of the imagination." Nor can it really be called a drama - though he does classify it as such - because "the action is not probable." The behavior of the brothers in letting themselves get lost at a time "when their sister sinks with fatigue in a pathless wilderness" is far from reasonable. The long speeches "have not the spriteliness of a dialogue animated by reciprocal contention, but seem rather declamations deliberately composed, and formally repeated, on a moral question." As a consequence, the audience responds "without passion, without anxiety."<sup>1</sup>



In the introduction to his edition of the Poems, Warton takes issue with Johnson's criticism of the structure of Comus in these words:

We must not read Comus with an eye to the stage, or with the expectation of dramatic propriety. . . . Comus is a suite of Speeches, not interesting by discrimination of character; not conveying a variety of incidents, not gradually exciting curiosity; but perpetually attracting attention by sublime sentiment, by fanciful imagery of the richest vein, by an exuberance of picturesque description, poetical allusion, and ornamental expression. While it widely departs from the grotesque anomalies of the Mask now in fashion, it does not nearly approach to the natural constitution of a regular play, . . . This is the first time the old English Mask was in some degree reduced to the principles and form of rational composition. . . . On the whole, whether Comus be or be not deficient as a drama, whether it is considered as an Epic drama, a series of lines, a Mask, or a poem, I am of opinion, that our author is here only inferior to his own Paradise Lost.<sup>2</sup>

Warton's defense of the poem against Johnson's attacks fails, however, to come to grips with the basic problem of genre and neatly evades the real issue by praising the work as an example of superb poetic style. The same approach is employed in the critique written by the dramatist Richard Cumberland for the performance of Comus in 1808. Cumberland is confident that Milton's "fine poetry" more than compensates for any deficiencies in the external structure. Milton "risqued nothing, therefore, so long as he wrote well," Cumberland says, "for even allegory and metaphysics (ingredients above all most hostile to the constitution of the drama) were to be rendered palatable to the Lord President and his company,





when administered through the vehicle of his dulcifying poetry."<sup>3</sup> Like Cumberland, Macaulay glosses over the structural inconsistencies by saying:

It is when Milton escapes from the shackles of the dialogue, when he is discharged from the labour of uniting two incongruous styles, when he is at liberty to indulge his choral raptures without reserve, that he rises even above himself.<sup>4</sup>

And Walter Bagehot, writing in a similar vein, declares:

Comus has no longer the peculiar exceptional popularity which it used to have. We can talk without general odium of its defects. Its characters are nothing, its sentiments are tedious, its story is not interesting. But it is only when we have realized the magnitude of its deficiencies that we comprehend the peculiarity of its greatness. Its power is in its style.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to the more benign attitude of earlier critics toward Milton's apparent failure to fulfill the requirements of the masque form, modern criticism generally is adamant in its refusal to overlook or minimize the problems which Johnson raised and which simply cannot be ignored if Milton's intention in the poem is to be more accurately determined. Enid Welsford argues that while the poem does indeed possess the basic masque features as the poetic induction, the two anti-masques, the main masque, and the epilogue, it is actually nothing more than a dramatized debate. She points out that dancing, revelry, the moment of discovery of the masquers - these and other elements so clearly predominant in the conventional Court masques and particularly prominent in



Ben Jonson's masques - have very little place and significance in Comus. The difficulty, she says, is that the leading characters, the Lady and her brothers, do not appear as masquers at all; and the entire poem can be read without being particularly aware of the fact that there are dances. Behind all this Miss Welsford sees a fundamental difference in spirit, atmosphere, and tone between Comus and the ordinary masque.

"The hinge on which Comus turns," she says,

is not the solution of a riddle, not a sudden metamorphosis or revelation, but an act of free choice. This is most important, for it shows that difference in structure corresponds to a difference in spirit between Comus and the Court masque; the masque is a dramatised dance, Comus is a dramatised debate.  
 . . .

Milton has freed Comus not only from the atmosphere and background of the banqueting hall, but also from the tone of compliment and gallantry which pervaded the Court masque. . . . There was of course no inherent incongruity between the masque form and the didactic spirit; both Spenser and Ben Jonson conveyed ethical teaching through the masque, and there was, from first to last, an affinity between the masque and the morality play. But there is in Comus a subtle incongruity between the symbolism and the idea that it is meant to symbolize, and of this incongruity Milton seems to be entirely unaware. He could not see that the masque, whose presiding deity was Hymen, was a most unsuitable vehicle for the unfolding of the "sage and serious doctrine of virginity"; he could not see that the ideal of self-righteous asceticism, which he expounds through the mouths of the virtuous characters, is incompatible with the ideal of the golden world of beauty which pervades so much of his poetry. . . .

The golden world ruled by Hymen is emphatically not the right symbol for Milton's harsh creed, in which goodness is identified with power rather than love, and evil is identified with sensuality rather than with cruelty and selfishness, and in which the Universe rests not upon self-expressive love but upon an everlasting antagonism, an ultimately insoluble dualism.<sup>6</sup>







Miss Welsford's misgivings about the appropriateness of the masque form as a vehicle for the discussion of weighty doctrinal and moral issues are shared to a greater or less degree by a number of other critics as well. In commenting on the important differences between Comus and the typical masque of the period, J.H. Hanford notes in particular that Milton "expands the dialogue portion of the piece far beyond its usual limits and injects into it an earnestness of meaning quite foreign to the tradition."<sup>7</sup> D.C. Allen suggests that the apologetic character of the Latin motto which Milton chose for the work and the variants between the printed poem and the manuscripts "reflect Milton's own dissatisfaction with the work."

It is much longer than the masque as written by Jonson or Daniel; its cast of speaking characters is much smaller; its locale of action is much less fantastic; its plot, though not exactly more elaborate, is more tense; its theme is more serious; it is totally wanting in humorousness; and its emphasis is more on dramatic crisis than on spectacle, dance, costume, and even singing. . . . The want of all these qualities disestablishes Comus as a true masque, although it does not make it into a drama.<sup>8</sup>

Allen concludes that the poem is a "patchwork of styles", a "melange of various tendencies and styles that never merge into anything intensely organic", an "experimental piece" in which "the conflicts in external structure, in pre-text, and in thematic substance continue to struggle for an equation that cannot be written."<sup>9</sup>



Eugene Haun suspects that much of the adverse criticism concerning the external structure of Comus is based on the mistaken assumption that some kind of prototype existed for this particular form of literary expression and that any deviation from the established norm disqualified the work for inclusion in the masque category. He points out, however, that the only one indispensable element in a masque appears to have been the introduction of music and dancing. Aside from this, the many masques written before and after Milton's time had very little in common. Some masques were very short; others were quite long. Some consisted mainly of dancing and singing; others concentrated on dialogue with the introduction of only an occasional song. In some, the plot is nothing; in others, plot and dramatic development are everything. "So Comus," he continues, "is by no means unique in its well-known divagations from the proper-masque form. Rather it is one of a sizable group of pieces which were presented without cavil as masques, although the music is subordinate to the drama and the dance is reduced to mere ornamentation. They represent a stage in the development of the musical drama in England. It is only when Comus is considered in a critical vacuum that it seems to be a wondrous mutation; actually, it is a natural offshoot in a steady evolution."<sup>10</sup> Mr. Haun sums up his study of the matter in the following words:





Comus is then to be viewed as one of a considerable number of musical dramatic pieces which were thoroughly familiar to the sophisticated theatre-going audience of the time. They do not classify readily, but they have a sufficient number of characteristics in common to enable one to speak of them as a genre with some assurance. They are usually called masques, but they are not proper-masques; the emphasis is upon the drama, which is apt to be built around a complete plot-structure rather than the truncated or fragmentary plot usually found in the proper masque; the subject is frequently allegorical or mythological or a combination of those two; the drama does not exist as a vehicle for the dance, but on the contrary the dance functions as a mere ornament to the drama; the music is apt to be of greater significance than the dancing, frequently being employed dramatically. Some of these pieces are called moral-masques. Some of them, like Comus are simply referred to as masques. What we have here are a set of traditional works, which are certainly not opera but which employ music too frequently and too deliberately to be classified merely as plays.<sup>11</sup>

W.T. Furniss's study of the multiplicity of forms in which the masque was known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries leads him to the same general conclusion reached by Haun. "The masque throughout its life," Furniss says, "was a fluid form, taking a different shape under each writer who dealt with it."<sup>12</sup>

The distinctive shape which Milton gave to Comus makes it the kind of masque which is perhaps best described as a masque sui generis. Like most masques, it was written for a specific occasion to provide an elegant, sophisticated piece of entertainment for an aristocratic audience. Milton had already written Arcades, his first masque, in honor of the Countess Dowager of Derby, the stepmother of the Earl of



Bridgewater, and was thoroughly conversant with the conventional requirements of the masque form. Arcades celebrates a simple domestic occasion in a charmingly fanciful manner. The presenting of some young members of the family to the Countess becomes the occasion for singing, dancing, and compliment; and the atmosphere is light and gay throughout. In Comus, however, Milton introduces an altogether different note, a note which seems to be completely out of harmony with the important political and social occasion for which it was written. He uses the masque, not as an end in itself, but as the vehicle for the organizing and the presenting of a serious discussion on the question of chastity. This is a subject which appears to have been very closely related to his belief that he was a man chosen and set apart for a divine purpose. The occasion obviously dictated the form, but this did not deter Milton from adapting the form to suit his purposes. "His palpable model," as Daniells points out, "is almost always one of the recognized genres, but the traditional form is only his starting point: what he makes of it is wholly his own."<sup>13</sup> That Milton should reshape a masque into a dramatized debate on the power of chastity to overcome vice was quite natural for a man who had dedicated his life to the service of God and was determined to live as ever in his great Task-master's eye.







But what are we to understand by the word "chastity" as Milton uses it? This question might well serve as the starting point for a consideration of the various problems of interpretation which the critics have encountered in attempting to determine more precisely the meaning of the poem.

Denis Saurat describes Comus as "one long praise of temperance, self-mastery, chastity."<sup>14</sup> The Lady, who stands for chastity, triumphs "o'er sensual Folly, and Intemperance" by steadfastly refusing to drink from the enchanted cup which Comus, the villain of the masque, offers her. The spirit triumphs over the flesh, reason over desire. But the victory can hardly be called an impressive one because there is very little genuine conflict and struggle involved in the Lady's efforts to overcome the temptations of Comus. The tempter does not really try very hard to break down her resistance. Indeed, he is far from being the kind of lecherous villain one would expect him to be. This poses the interesting question: How much power does chastity require to withstand an antagonist who is only half-heartedly intent upon achieving his purpose? As Robert M. Adams points out, Comus is a seducer who makes remarkably few and feeble efforts to seduce; though he possesses the traditional enchanting devices of his mother, a glass and a wand, he never brings them explicitly into play. Instead of offering the Lady his magic brew while she is wandering alone, unsuspecting, and thirsty in the forest, he brings her into a palace, lets her see his



troop of "roughly-headed Monsters," and only then, when she is thoroughly aroused and suspicious, tries to argue her into drinking of the cup. . . . The wand and the cup, though much in evidence, never exert an active compulsion; and the seduction of the Lady, though unmistakably threatened, never develops into a real possibility.<sup>15</sup>

If Comus "excels his Mother at her mighty Art," as the Attendant Spirit would have us believe, we see no really convincing demonstration of his ability to do so. If he possesses the "might of hellish charms" and "with his bare wand can unthread thy joints/And crumble all thy sinews," we wonder why he is so reluctant to make full use of the formidable powers of enchantment at his command. When the brothers, brandishing their swords, rush into the palace to rescue their sister, we find to our amazement that Comus and his rout beat a hasty retreat and offer only token resistance. Milton tells us repeatedly that Comus is evil, but the fact that his name has been universally adopted as the title for the masque would seem to indicate that the villain of the piece is somehow more attractive than the heroine and, as a result, our moral sympathies do not flow where Milton expected. This raises the interesting question as to why this should be so, knowing, as we do, that the Lady's argument for virtue is better than Comus's and that her ethic is right and his is wrong.

The answer is undoubtedly to be found in what Enid Welsford refers to as the difference in atmosphere, spirit,





and tone between Comus and the conventional masque. The action and the argument of Comus are dominated by a "harsh creed, in which goodness is identified with power rather than love, and evil is identified with sensuality rather than with cruelty and selfishness."<sup>16</sup> This tone and atmosphere seem to pervade the whole masque and are established at the very beginning in the lines spoken by the Attendant Spirit. His errand, he explains, is to come to the defence and guard of the favored few in the world who are the true servants of virtue and who

by due steps aspire  
To lay their just hands on that Golden Key  
That opes the Palace of Eternity.

He contrasts the few who have "just hands" with the many who

with low-thoughted care,  
Confined and pestered in this pinfold here,  
Strive to keep up a frail and feverish being,  
Unmindful of the crown that Virtue gives,  
After this mortal change, to her true servants  
Amongst the enthroned gods on sainted seats.

The Attendant Spirit is interested only in those who are the "favored of high Jove", and if it were not for such, he

would not soil these pure Ambrosial weeds  
With the rank vapors of this sin-worn mold.

The disdainful and contemptuous attitude of the Attendant Spirit toward humanity in general is quite incompatible with the spirit of love and concern for the lost sinner which is



at the very heart of the Christian concept of God's relationship to man. And it is precisely this attitude which characterizes the Lady -- a self-righteous and contemptuous attitude toward all that is human and real in the world and an overweening confidence in her own self-sufficiency.

The Lady has become separated from her brothers and is lost in an "ominous wood" inhabited by Comus and his rout of monsters. But she is one of the "favor'd of high Jove" and can therefore rest assured that the Attendant Spirit will come to her "defense and guard" and give her "safe convoy." Indeed, it is for this very purpose that he has descended from heaven "Swift as the Sparkle of a glancing Star." But does it really make much difference to the Lady whether he helps her or not? And how much help does he actually give?

As we follow the developments in the story, we discover that Jove's emissary plays only a very slight part in the total action of the masque. Nowhere does he determine the events or intervene directly in the conflict between the Lady and Comus. After his initial appearance in the Prologue, we do not see him again until half way through the masque - and then only to inform the brothers of the alarming situation facing their sister and to suggest to them the course of action to be pursued in rescuing her. In the end, however, it is neither the brothers nor the Attendant Spirit, but





Sabrina, who is able to release the Lady from the enchanted chair, whereupon the Attendant Spirit urges the Lady to come away with him to "holier ground"

Lest the Sorcerer us entice  
With some other new device.

Milton could not, of course, make it appear that the Lady's victory over Comus would have been impossible without the special help and protection of the Attendant Spirit. As Adams puts it, "To make her virtue wholly dependent on heaven's assistance would scarcely be an overwhelming compliment to pay her. One simply does not tell an earl's daughter that she is chaste only by the grace of God."<sup>17</sup> The fact is, however, that despite her chastity and the correctness of her beliefs and doctrines, there is very little that is appealing about her personality. Her attitude from the very beginning is smug, aloof, and icy. The first words she speaks are extremely harsh and condemnatory in tone. Surely the rustic games and the music and dancing of the villagers cannot possibly be as wicked and wanton as she would have us believe. And when she continues her soliloquy and puts her trust in Faith, Hope, and Chastity, instead of Charity, to keep her "life and honor unassail'd", we can only say that a life without Christian charity, no matter how virtuous that life may be, is "as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal." M.M. Ross



is frankly shocked by what he regards as Milton's impiety in substituting chastity for charity:

Faith, Hope, and Chastity. And the greatest of these is chastity! The substitution of chastity for charity is the reduction of the highest supernatural grace to a secondary practical virtue.<sup>18</sup>

And Kenneth Muir, no less shocked, conjectures that Milton must be criticizing the Lady's inhumanity.<sup>19</sup> However, it is very hard to believe that Milton would be so crass as to ignore the essentially complimentary purpose of the masque genre and the occasion for which Comus was written and deliberately seek to embarrass the Earl of Bridgewater by holding up his daughter to public scorn and ridicule.

The few critics who have not deplored Milton's substitution of chastity for charity in this passage have attempted to explain it in Platonic terms. "Chastity and charity," says William G. Madsen, "are but two sides of the same coins: or better still, two stages ('due steps') in the ascent of the soul to God."<sup>20</sup> Hughes suggests that Milton thought of charity in the Platonic sense "as the love of the Supreme Good which chastens all inferior passions."<sup>21</sup> As ingenious as these explanations may be, however, they simply do not come to grips with the basic problem of the kind of tone and atmosphere which pervades the masque, an atmosphere which is the very antithesis of what the Christian concept of charity





implies. As Herford points out, "Milton's Chastity, sublime and exalted as it is, is at bottom a self-regarding virtue."<sup>22</sup> Roy Daniells speaks out even more emphatically and accuses the Lady of "a self-righteousness devoid of both charity and humility."<sup>23</sup>

If we turn now to the central scene in the masque, the debate between the Lady and Comus, we are not surprised that the Lady has the better arguments, though, as some critics suggest, Comus has the better poetry. His "well placed words of glozing courtesy/Baited with reasons not unplausible" have indeed on many occasions proven to be very effective in enabling him to wind himself "into the easy-hearted man/And hug him into snares." But the Lady, he discovers, is not one of the "easy-hearted". Though Comus may be able to restrict the freedom of her body, he cannot interfere with the freedom of her mind. The Lady has nothing but contempt for this "fool", this "foul deceiver", who would have her believe that she is acting contrary to Nature by refusing to indulge in the sensual pleasures of life:

I had not thought to have have unlocked my lips  
In this unhallowed air, but that this Juggler  
Would think to charm my judgment, as mine eyes,  
Obtruding false rules pranked in reason's garb.

She goes on to make a brief and reasoned defence of "most innocent nature" and the "holy dictate of spare Temperance" and



then continues in a tone aflame with righteous indignation:

To him that dares  
 Arm his profane tongue with contemptuous words  
 Against the Sun-clad power of Chastity  
 Fain would I something say, yet to what end?  
 Thou hast nor Ear nor Soul to apprehend  
 The sublime notion and high mystery  
 That must be utter'd to unfold the sage  
 And serious doctrine of Virginity.  
 And thou art worthy that thou shouldst not know  
 More happiness than this thy present lot . . . .  
 Thou art not fit to hear thyself convinc't;  
 Yet should I try, the uncontrolled worth  
 Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits  
 To such a flame of sacred vehemence,  
 That dumb things would be mov'd to sympathize,  
 And the brute Earth would lend her nerves, and shake,  
 Till all thy magic structures reared so high,  
 Were shatter'd into heaps o'er thy false head.

If, as some critics suggest, the Lady's manner seems ungracious, we should keep in mind, as A.E. Dyson points out, that she has no cause to be otherwise. "The position in which she is placed," he says, "does not lend itself to social graces and charms." She is, after all, the very "embodiment of that vital and perennial conflict between chastity and lust."<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the chorus of misgivings about the Lady's attitude continues to be heard. S.L. Goldberg criticizes her for presuming to think that Comus's argument has no value whatever, "which is simply untrue," he says; and he goes on to say parenthetically, "Hence, of course, the forlorn attempts of various critics to find a 'reconciliation' of some kind in the epilogue." Furthermore, the Lady's moral







fervor about chastity and virginity "is more real than they are, and even that is not altogether convincing."<sup>25</sup> But more than that:

As she has appeared in the rest of the poem, her lips have been too often tight with conscious moral rectitude and quick, uneasy suspicion of the world . . . The note of shrill, almost melodramatic repulsion comes a little too readily: "Fool do not boast . . .", " 'Twill not false traitor . . .", "I had not thought to have unlockt my lips In this unhallow'd air . . ." Confronting Comus, her attitude is tainted with the same smugness she has exhibited from the beginning . . . . Virtue may have the better doctrines perhaps, but its voice leaves them jejune or else withers them.<sup>26</sup>

Writing in a somewhat similar vein, M.M. Ross says:

Characteristically, the Lady seems to overestimate her own role in the workings of grace. She thinks that if she should but try, "the uncontrolled worth of this pure cause" could be made to shatter the devil and all his works. But when the Brothers rush in to the rescue, the Lady is found senseless (though otherwise intact) under the dread spell of Comus. Self-sufficiency has failed. The saving doctrine of virginity is presumably transcendent beyond the Lady's faithful but egotistical comprehension of it.<sup>27</sup>

Roy Daniells sums up his impressions of the Lady in the following words:

The sad thing about the Lady is that neither from the point of view of nature nor that of grace is she a sympathetic figure. Her priggish, self-righteous egotism unfits her for the pastoral world; her total lack of charity, humility, or a sense of sin disqualifies her for the world of Christian character.<sup>28</sup>

The enthusiastic claims which the Lady makes for chastity are underlined and re-enforced by the lofty sentiments expressed in the debate that is going on between the two brothers somewhere in the forest while the Lady is being



tempted in Comus's palace. The younger brother has no illusions about the serious consequences which can be expected when a beautiful, young defenceless maiden is lost in the wood, unless Heaven comes to her aid. However, the older brother assures him that she is by no means as defenceless as he imagines. She has, he says, "a hidden strength",

Which if Heav'n gave it, may be term'd her own:

'Tis chastity, my brother, chastity:

She that has that, is clad in complete steel . . .

Do ye believe me yet, or shall I call

Antiquity from the old Schools of Greece

To testify the arms of Chastity?

So dear to Heav'n is Saintly chastity,

That when a soul is found sincerely so,

A thousand liveried Angels lackey her,

Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,

And in clear dream and solemn vision

Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear,

Till oft converse with heav'nly habitants

Begin to cast a beam on th'outward shape,

The unpolluted temple of the mind,

And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,

Till all be made immortal.

"How charming is divine Philosophy!" exclaims the younger brother. For all its charm, however, the elder brother's philosophy, with its unbounded confidence in the self-sufficiency of chastity, fails to explain why in the climactic scene final deliverance of the Lady must come from a completely different, and rather strange, source. True, the Lady has demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that "Virtue may be assail'd but never hurt." She has preserved her chastity







intact. But she is unable to free herself from the enchanted chair. Nor can her brothers, or "haemony", or the Attendant Spirit dispel Comus's charm which keeps the Lady "in stony fetters fixt and motionless." Help comes from the martyred virgin Sabrina, now transformed into a goddess of the River Severn.

The Sabrina episode is clearly the climactic moment in the action of the masque. Its purpose, as M.M. Ross points out, is "to represent the saving operation of grace on the highest level after human heroism, art, and self-reliance have failed." However, this purpose, he feels, is not achieved successfully. The sublime doctrine of virginity to which the Lady has alluded is "nothing more than practical sexual prudence."<sup>29</sup>

The Communion of Saints, distantly but inevitably suggested by the invocation of the virgin and by the baptismal imagery, becomes nothing more than a special league for the protection of unchaperoned girls. Virginity turns out to be nothing, after all, but virginity - in the utterly physical sense. One's hope for a metaphysical realization of the doctrine is flattened. There is no doctrine.

The Christian and pagan ingredients of the symbolism have cancelled each other out. The Christian images, dissociated from charity, remain static and merely picturesque. They cannot transform the pagan detail into the soaring significance one has had been led to expect. And the pagan material reduces the Christian associations to the merest magic. Sabrina is localized to a particular shore with a particular occult office to perform. In the process, evil as well as grace loses universal significance. . . .



Despite the negative personality of the Lady herself, one was hopeful for a poetic realization of her doctrine. .  
 . .30

It is in the epilogue, Ross goes on to say, that Milton attempts to extricate himself from the labyrinth of incongruities and ambiguities which beset the ideological and ethical content of the poem:

In an entirely humanist ascent of pictures and symbols, no Christian virgin without charity appears to interrupt and confuse the sense. Milton is now on surer ground. But he has not unified his poem. The epilogue is spoken by the Attendant Spirit and has no relation symbolically to the character or behavior of the Lady. It completes the sense of the poem by changing and correcting it. For Youth and Joy are both alien to the spinster-like debater of the main fable, and the fine expansive lift of the epilogue has nothing in common poetically with the fumbling descent of the Sabrina scene.

Consequently, the poem lacks focus. The dedicated Milton of the sonnet "How soon hath Time" expresses his individualistic sense of dedication lyrically in the epilogue as he contemplates the elevation of the moral man. But the ethical life still lacks positive content. The ethical sense must attach itself to an intelligible and actual purpose or wither away. In Comus, on one level, Milton expresses the exhilaration of the dedicated moral self. On the other level, he is entangled in the treatment of a restrictive moral technique. On one level, the riches of classical and natural allusion are employed with unambiguous daring. On the other level, obsolescent Christian images collide with classical allusion. Milton fails to unify the two levels in any comprehensive and comprehensible purpose. Thus the note of exhilaration and the note of restraint remain distinct.<sup>31</sup>

The question of the function of the Epilogue and its relationship to the poem as a whole has received a great deal of attention and study. A.S.P. Woodhouse, whose brilliant analysis of the argument of Comus will be examined in







considerable detail in the next chapter, regards the Epilogue as "a key to the whole poem, or at least to Milton's intention in the poem." However, he adds this significant statement: "That intention is not, I think, successfully executed at all points: there are notes that jar, especially upon the modern (and uninstructed) ear."<sup>32</sup> In spite of the wide acceptance given to Professor Woodhouse's theological reading of the poem in terms of the principle of progression from nature to grace, the "notes that jar" are disturbingly strong enough to create a certain uneasiness and inconclusiveness about the complete validity of such an interpretation. The most jarring note of all is undoubtedly the note of spiritual pride which pervades the poem, pride, as S.L. Goldberg puts it, "in being spiritual, pride in one's superior knowledge of 'abstracted sublimities'". He goes on to say:

Milton was always inclined to pursue "abstracted sublimities" of one kind or another as the proper vantage-point from which to speak about life. Renaissance Platonism much encouraged this sort of weakness, and to the young, high-minded author of Comus, convinced that virtue is the meed of knowledge and over-valuing the knowledge to be found in books of doctrine, it must have proved irresistible. But while he contemplates his ideals with passionate fervour, he has a much less certain attitude to the world around him. He wants to love it, but also to deny its reality; indeed, he almost seems to despise the circumstances most people find themselves in, where one is usually less 'perplex't' to know and love the idea of Virtue than to know what one ought to do for the best.<sup>33</sup>

If we are to point to any one specific passage which sums up Milton's intention in the poem, it must surely be the



last six lines, the exhortation which he puts into the mouth of the Attendant Spirit:

Mortals that would follow me,  
Love virtue, she alone is free,  
She can teach ye how to climb  
Higher than the Sphery chime;  
Or if Virtue feeble were,  
Heav'n itself would stoop to her.

Milton is telling us here, in effect, that what he has been trying to show us in this masque is that the way to overcome the temptations of the flesh and rise to God is by being virtuous in this world. Virtue is quite capable of teaching mortals to get to heaven, and, if necessary, God will help. Milton is not, of course, to be understood as in any way disregarding or disparaging the doctrine of grace. Nevertheless, he clearly places the emphasis upon the self-sufficiency of virtue rather than upon the need for grace. As Adams points out:

No doubt Milton, like all other Christians, understood the efficacy of another power; but his silence here is more compatible with the emphasis that grace supplements virtue than with the negative assertion that virtue is inadequate without grace. The properly Miltonic mortal actively climbs toward grace, he does not passively wait to receive it.<sup>34</sup>

Referring specifically to the last two lines, Adams goes on to say:

By writing the last couplet in this form Milton can only have intended to convey that if virtue were feeble (which he did not think she was and had not represented her as being), heaven would stoop like a falcon to help her. . . . Active





virtue is a norm in the masque; passive acceptance of grace is an exception. . . . If it has any moral meaning at all, Comus intends something much closer to "the Lord helps those who help themselves" than to Caliban's notion of the deity, or Holy Willie's.<sup>35</sup>



### CHAPTER III

#### AN EVALUATION OF PROFESSOR A.S.P. WOODHOUSE'S "NATURE AND GRACE" APPROACH

Virtually all of the critical literature that has appeared on Comus since 1941 shows evidence of the influence of Professor Woodhouse's ideas about the poem as presented in his classic article "The Argument of Milton's Comus". Since the publication of this article, certain issues which previously had been considered central to the proper understanding of the masque have receded into the background to make room for what Woodhouse considers to be the major concern of the poem, namely the relationship between nature and grace. Both the action and the pattern of the masque, he says, emphasize the necessary progression from nature to grace and parallel very closely Milton's account of his own moral and spiritual development as outlined in the Apology for Smectymnuus.

In the first part of his article Woodhouse maintains that Comus cannot be properly understood unless it is interpreted in the light of a specific "intellectual frame of reference, common to the poet and his contemporary readers





but lost to a later age."<sup>1</sup> This particular Weltanschauung, common in the seventeenth as well as in earlier centuries, was to see life on two levels or in terms of two orders of existence: the natural and the religious. These may be called the order of nature and the order of grace. Both spheres of existence, from the point of view of the religious individual, are "dependent on the power and providence of God, but in a manner sufficiently different to warrant the restriction of the term religious (which means Christian) to one order only."<sup>2</sup> The distinctive nature of each of the two orders is explained as follows:

To the order of nature belongs not only the whole physical world, but also man himself considered simply as a denizen of that world. The rule of its government is expressed not only in the physical laws of nature, but in natural ethics (in what is significantly called the Law of Nature), and even in natural, as opposed to revealed, religion. This order is apprehended in experience and interpreted by reason; and it has its own wisdom, for upon the simple law of nature, by experience and reason, is erected the ethical system of a Plato, an Aristotle, or a Cicero. . . . To the order of grace belongs man in his character of supernatural being, with all that concerns his salvation and the two dispensations, the old and the new. The rule of its government is the revealed Law of God, received and interpreted by faith, which includes a special kind of experience, called religious experience.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that in his discussion of the two orders Woodhouse does not restrict the element of religion to the order of grace only. He does not say that the one order is religious and the other is not. What he does say, however, is that with reference to the order of grace he is



using the term "religion" in the special sense of "Christian". In other words, the order of nature is governed by natural religion while the order of grace is based on revealed religion or Christianity. The basic difference between the two orders, then, is that in the order of nature the kind of religion which operates is natural, as opposed to supernatural religion, which operates in the order of grace. Religion of any kind, be it natural or supernatural, is based on the belief that there is a principle, a power, a god (or gods) who controls all things and with whom man seeks to establish some kind of relationship. Natural religion attempts to establish this relationship by the use of natural powers, particularly human reason. Supernatural religion, on the other hand, operates with faith.

This frame of reference, Woodhouse explains, is not to be regarded as a "body of doctrine". But the use of such expressions as "grace," "faith," "Christian," "salvation," "a special kind of experience, called religious experience," with reference to the order of grace, makes it almost impossible to understand the precise nature of this order, as contrasted with the order of nature, without discussing doctrines. For example, in what sense is the word "grace" to be understood? Or, what is it that makes religious experience in the order of grace a special kind of experience? Is salvation to be viewed







primarily as an ethical process or as a divine act? But perhaps it is too early, at this stage in the development of his argument, to expect the answers to these questions. Let us go on to the next part of the article:

Now on the precise relation subsisting between the order of nature and the order of grace a great variety of opinion is possible and, especially in the seventeenth century, is met. There are those who insist on the sharp contrast and wide divergence of the two orders; and this class includes individuals and sects of opposite principles. The ascetic and the rigorist (for in this they agree, though not in the action that it entails) insist on the divergence, to depress nature and exalt grace; the naturalist, to exalt nature and depress grace, finding the demands of the higher order "unnatural" and denying their validity. There are those who insist on the clear-cut separation of the two orders with the intention of accepting them both (though perhaps with differing degrees of conviction) while avoiding all inference from the one to the other. Such is the fideist, who takes the order of grace on authority, but in the order of nature pursues his experimental and sceptical way; the Baconian scientist, with his two philosophies, natural and divine; the Puritan extremist, reactionary in the realm of grace, progressivist in the realm of nature. All of these - though for different ends - apply what I have called elsewhere the principle of segregation. Opposed to them is the large class of thinkers who (with many differing shades of emphasis and inference) agree in responding to the profound human instinct for a unified view of life, and who refuse to divorce the two orders. They insist that the order of grace is the superstructure whose foundations are securely laid in nature; that there is no interval between the two orders, which merge in an area common to both; that grace comes to perfect nature (an idea including discipline), not to destroy it; that man's well-being must be defined in terms of the two orders simultaneously, and that what is for his good as a natural being cannot be for his harm as a supernatural, or vice versa. This is the position of the Christian humanist, whose special relevance to Comus will in due course appear.<sup>4</sup>

To appreciate more fully the important distinctions Woodhouse makes in this passage, we must remember that



throughout the entire history of the Christian Church down to the seventeenth century the question of the relationship between nature and grace had been the subject of intensive study and persistent controversy and debate. St. Augustine and Pelagius were perhaps the first to enunciate clearly and distinctly the principle of segregation, the former in the interests of depressing nature and exalting grace, the latter with a view to depressing grace and exalting nature. Following in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul, St. Augustine established a view of humanity that persisted for six centuries and that, after Calvin's restatement and reaffirmation of this view in the sixteenth century, has not yet run its course in the world. Man, inherently depraved in body, mind, and spirit, can hope for salvation only through the vicarious atonement of Christ and through faith, which is possible only by the gift of grace. The two cardinal facts of man's relation to God are encompassed in the doctrines of original sin and divine grace. Between them, these two doctrines symbolize the gulf that is fixed between the humanistic and the Christian view of man. In one, he is a potentially good creature, a rational being capable of achieving great heights of knowledge and autonomous well-being. In the other, he is a fallen creature, guilty of the most heinous crime of disobedience to his Maker, impotent to save himself and totally dependent for







salvation upon the unmerited compassion of an outraged deity.

The firm grip of Augustinianism on medieval thought left little room for the advancement of the humanistic views of Pelagius, but was unable to destroy this movement altogether. With the coming of the thirteenth century, the time appeared to be ripe for a reassessment of the whole question of the relationship between nature and grace, reason and faith, and the possibility of integrating the two orders into a single, unified view of life. It remained for St. Thomas Aquinas to carry out this task. His was the unique achievement of drawing together in synthesis the worlds of nature and grace, reason and faith, natural theology and Christian theology. In matters of dogma Thomas Aquinas acknowledged the complete authority of Augustine, also with respect to the doctrine of grace. However, in Aquinas's treatment of this doctrine we note a distinct shift in emphasis. In the words of Ernst Cassirer,

The emphasis in the doctrine of grace has passed from Augustine's gratia praeveniens to the side of gratia cooperans. The power of grace is not limited, since it still forms the beginning and the end of the movement which leads man to God. It introduces this movement and guides it safely to its goal. But between beginning and end there is now a middle ground within which natural powers are recognized as enjoying rights of their own and a relative independence. Natural knowledge is not necessarily subject to error. For this is the knowledge which on its part prepares religious faith and creates the praeambula fidei. Moreover, the fall did not extinguish in the human will all powers towards good. If its power is weakened and diminished, the will retains, nevertheless, a



natural inclination towards the true and the good. It is thus the regnum naturae which points the way to the regnum gratiae. Grace does not nullify nature; rather, it raises nature to its own level, and, finally, even above itself. Gratia naturam non tollit, sed perficit. The opposition between nature and grace has thus now become a series of degrees; and philosophic knowledge can understand this gradation as necessary, and can examine and justify it on the basis of its own fundamental presuppositions. From reason to grace, from lex naturalis to lex divina there is a clear and sure development.<sup>5</sup>

Aquinas must be regarded, then, as the great champion of the principle of integration on the nature-grace issue, as opposed to the Augustinian principle of segregation. The latter view was to gain the ascendancy once again in the period of the Reformation and was to find its most vociferous and unequivocal support in the Calvinistic Puritanism of Milton's day. The basic tenets of orthodox Calvinism may be summed up as follows: Man disobeyed God's Law and deserved to be cast away forever. Nothing that man can do for himself can remove this universal guilt of sin. But God of his free grace chose to send his Son to atone once for all for man's sin. Is every sinner therefore saved? The orthodox Calvinist declared that not all are saved. It is only to some that God extends his free grace. Only some are rescued by his will from the fate that all deserve. "Whom he did foreknow he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son." (Romans 8:29) Sin might still war in the souls of these elect, but by virtue of their election they continue to







strive in faith and the issue is sure, a predestined victory. The elect must witness to God's grace by living the saintly life to the glory of God. The scheme of salvation seemed inexorably logical and Biblical: election, vocation, justification, sanctification, glorification. It worked itself out in men's lives. It was the constant theme of Puritan preaching and writing, and underlying it all was the persistent emphasis upon man's total depravity and utter inability to contribute anything whatsoever to his salvation.

The theology of Puritanism in its most rigorous form ruled out completely any possibility of finding some kind of "middle ground" between the orders of nature and grace or of reason and faith. Philosophy and religion, human wisdom and divine wisdom were regarded as being wholly different in kind and therefore irreconcilable. The Renaissance humanistic idea of the dignity of man, based on the cardinal assumption of man's rational self-control, was regarded by Puritans as one of the most dangerous forms of heresy. Calvin's central concept of an inscrutable and omnipotent God demanded the utter degradation of the human race. The sum of wisdom is not our vaunted reason (too puny to conduct us to God, too feeble to comprehend his power); it is to know God in his majesty and man in his impotence. And to know this aright is to realize that there can be no compromise between reason and



faith or nature and grace.

But let us go on now to consider the other side of the picture. Woodhouse speaks of "the large class of thinkers who (with many differing shades of emphasis and inference) agree in responding to the profound human instinct for a unified view of life, and who refuse to divorce the two orders. . . . This is the position of the Christian humanist, whose special relevance to Comus will in due course appear."<sup>6</sup>

Christian humanism may be defined in general terms as the fusion of classical wisdom with divine, of reason with faith, of nature with grace. It is a view of life which is based on the conviction that right reason, recta ratio, is a kind of philosophic conscience planted by God in all men alike. By using his rational powers properly man can, up to a point, comprehend and rule his own nature and destiny. In other words, despite his imperfections and frailties, man has the inherent God-given capacity to work out his own salvation with God's help. What recta ratio cannot do, God's grace will supply. Thus grace comes to perfect nature, not to destroy it.

Of the various types and shades of early seventeenth century Christian humanism, none was perhaps more closely related to Milton's temperament and outlook than that of the Cambridge Platonists. But first a word about Richard Hooker,





whose work Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity might very well be regarded as the very embodiment of the spirit of Christian humanism in the period immediately preceding Milton. In the first book, Hooker pictures a world of immutable ethical law arranged in a system of hierarchies. "The being of God is a kind of law to his workings", he says, and the eternal law laid up in the bosom of God is manifest throughout all creation. "His commanding those things to be which are, and to be in such sort as they are, to keep that tenure and course which they do, importeth the establishment of nature's law."<sup>7</sup> All things, including man, are potentially something which as yet they are not actually. There is in all things a longing for perfection; and since God is the source of all goodness and perfection, it is God towards whom the whole creation is striving. Even pagan philosophers have been aware of this.

Now the unique quality in man which sets him apart from the instinctive urges in nature is his capacity for "reaching higher than unto sensible things."<sup>8</sup> Man has reason to guide him, direct him, illuminate him, and to show him what is right and wrong. True, his reason has been impaired because of the Fall, but through education and self-discipline it is possible to improve and strengthen its powers. Moreover, by exercising his rational faculties man is able to



discover and apply certain fundamental moral principles, leading him on to the further discovery that he has not only a body but also a soul, and that the soul ought to control the body. Next, reason can discover the fact that there is a Supreme Being and that somehow man must seek to establish some kind of relationship with this supernatural power. The perfection for which man yearns by his very nature is a perfection that transcends the material world:

For man doth not seem to rest satisfied, either with fruition of that wherewith his life is preserved, or with performance of such actions as advance him most deservedly in estimation; but doth further covet, yea oftentimes manifestly pursue with great sedulity and earnestness, that which cannot stand him in any stead for vital use, that which exceedeth the reach of sense; yea somewhat above capacity of reason, somewhat divine and heavenly, which with hidden exultation it rather surmiseth than conceiveth; somewhat it seeketh, and what this is directly it knoweth not, yet very intensive desire thereof doth so incite it, that all other known delights and pleasures are laid aside, they give place to the search of this but only suspected desire. If the soul of man did serve only to give him being in this life, then things appertaining to this life would content him, as we see they do other creatures; which creatures enjoying what they live by seek no further, but in this contentation do shew a kind of acknowledgement that there is no higher good which doth any way belong to them. With us it is otherwise. For although the beauties, riches, honours, sciences, virtues, and perfections of all men living, were in the present possession of one; yet somewhat beyond and above all this there would still be sought and earnestly thirsted for. So that Nature even in this life doth plainly claim and call for a more divine perfection than either of these two that have been mentioned.<sup>9</sup>

How then does man succeed in reaching the heavenly perfection which he desires? Reason can suggest no other way than the way of good works. But since we are fallen creatures, even







the very best of our good works are not good enough in the eyes of God. Either there is no hope of salvation, or God has revealed a supernatural and extraordinary way. This God in his mercy and grace has done. In his holy Word he tells us that the way of salvation is through faith in Christ, the Savior of all mankind. What man cannot do, God has done for him.<sup>10</sup>

Hooker's Christian humanism is in the tradition of the Thomistic synthesis of nature and grace, in which Aristotle becomes assimilated into Christian theology and the fundamental Pauline-Augustinian pattern of sin, redemption, and regeneration through faith in Christ's vicarious atonement remains undisturbed and in firm control of the scheme of salvation for man. Thus philosophy serves as the handmaid of theology, and the term "Christian" retains its Christocentric and soteriological meaning. The synergistic process in this type of nature-grace relationship is preponderantly theocentric, since the operation of God's grace is seen not merely in the general sense of providential care but in the special sense of redeeming, saving, and regenerating grace. In other words, grace comes not merely to help man in the process of helping himself but first and foremost to redeem, restore, and convert him, thus creating a spiritually "new man".



Turning now to an examination of the nature-grace relationship as conceived by the Cambridge Platonists, we find nature playing the major role in the synergistic process, with grace standing by to help if necessary. "'Salvation' is indeed the purpose of the Gospel, but salvation is conceived not as an ultimate destination in the next world, to be attained by passing through all the technical stages of redemption, justification, sanctification, etc., but as a state of moral purification now."<sup>11</sup> This state of moral purification is conceived in Platonic and Neoplatonic terms, more specifically in terms of Plotinus's doctrine of the soul's ascent to God. According to this doctrine, the first step in the return of the soul to God is the act by which it determines to reverse its downward movement and by a process of purification and inward contemplation seeks to free itself from the world of sense. The ethical quality of the soul depends upon the direction it chooses to take, either towards the world of spirit or towards the world of matter. Knowledge of the divine and ultimate union with God is possible only for that soul which has achieved within itself the decisive turning away from material things and the movement upward towards the world of spirit. The soul contemplates the divine, not by virtue of a revelation that comes to it from without, but by





creating the divine within itself and thereby making itself like the divine:

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiselling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine. . . . If the eye that adventures the vision be dimmed by vice, impure, or weak, and unable in its cowardly blenching to see the uttermost brightness, then it sees nothing even though another point to what lies plain to sight before it. To any vision must be brought an eye adapted to what is to be seen, and having some likeness to it. Never did eye see the sun unless it had first become sunlike, and never can the Soul have vision of the First Beauty unless itself be beautiful.<sup>12</sup>

This basic thought of Plotinus's theology became the core of English Neoplatonism by way of Ficino, Pico, and other Renaissance Neoplatonists, and occupies a central position in the thought of the Cambridge School. Underlying Plotinus's doctrine of the soul's ascent is the Platonic notion of self-realization. Plato knows nothing of the doctrine of the absolute depravity of the will. The basic assumption of Augustine's doctrine of grace is that the human will, once fallen from God, can never by its own power return. For it is henceforth deprived of all goodness and must rely on the grace and mercy of God in Christ to redeem it. In Plato's thought, however, there is no doctrine of



redemption. Man must rely on his own initiative and his own powers, which participate in the divine, to raise himself to God. By following reason he is following what is best and most distinctive in him, what may be called the God within him. Man's rational faculties link him with God and hold the key to his ultimate union with God.

The Cambridge Platonists made much of reason. In the exercise of reason they saw the distinctive quality in man. For them, reason was much more than the intellect or the understanding or the reasoning faculty. It included also the spiritual faculty whereby spiritual things are discerned. They conceived of reason as a divine light and of morality as the outward expression of living in conformity with the dictates of this divine light within. But if reason is exalted so highly and given such an important place, will it not come into conflict with faith? Such a conflict may indeed occur, but only as a result of ignorance or misunderstanding. With a single voice the Cambridge Platonists declare the unity of faith and reason, grace and nature. Faith comes to enlighten those areas of the mind which require supernatural illumination in a special sense, in the sense of revealed religion. Revelation supplies what reason cannot attain. Grace comes to perfect nature, not to destroy it. It is the superstructure, not a completely new or different structure.







The Cambridge Platonists did not reject the traditional theology of sin and salvation through Christ, but they interpreted this theology in such a way as to make it consonant with their Platonic vision of the good life. "The old and oft-repeated version of the sacrifice for sin had no place in their teaching, and they conceived of salvation in a form and spirit entirely different from the vivid pictorial imagery of the Calvinists."<sup>13</sup> Christ's redemptive work is viewed primarily in ethical terms as a pattern and example which he has provided to show us how we ought to live in order that we might come to be like him. To be saved is to be morally sound, to follow the dictates of right reason illuminated by the "candle of the Lord" that is within us.

Milton undoubtedly would have felt quite at home among such men as Benjamin Whichcote, John Smith, Ralph Cudworth, and Henry More, the leading figures in the Cambridge Platonist school of thought. "Milton's Platonising," to quote E.M.W. Tillyard, "in itself not remarkable, is interesting in bringing him into close relations with the Cambridge Platonists. To investigate these relations would be to go too far afield; but it can be said dogmatically that Milton's religious and ethical ideas, as gathered from the body of his prose works, are in their outlines close to those of the Cambridge Platonists."<sup>14</sup> Whatever the precise nature of Milton's relations



with the Cambridge group may have been, there can be little doubt about the fact that for him, as well as for them, nature and grace complement each other and work together to achieve man's salvation. "This," Woodhouse points out, "is the position of the Christian humanist, whose special relevance to Comus will in due course appear."<sup>15</sup>

This takes us to the next part of Woodhouse's article, which deals with the question of how Milton illustrates the relationship between nature and grace in the poem:

The common assumption, correct as far as it goes, is that the argument of Comus has for its theme chastity. But more careful examination reveals that coupled with the doctrine of chastity (not identified with it as a careless reader might suppose, but coupled with it) are two others: a doctrine of temperance and continence (the "holy dictates of spare Temperance") and a doctrine of virginity ("the sage And serious doctrine of virginity"). When these facts are brought into relation with the intellectual frame of reference, we observe that temperance and continence are virtues on the natural level; that chastity, the central virtue of the poem, moves in an area common to nature and grace; and that the doctrine of virginity belongs exclusively to the order of grace, which in the poem it is used to illustrate and even symbolize. Or, if one may resort to a simple visual formulation, what we have is this:

(1) The doctrine of temperance, which, in the circumstances presented in the poem, is necessarily:

(2) A doctrine of continence, which, to render it secure, and to translate it from a negative to a positive conception, requires to be completed by:

(3) The doctrine of chastity, which is thus grounded in nature. This is, moreover, elaborated, still on the level of nature, in terms of the Platonic philosophy, to the point where it can be taken over by Christianity, which

Nature

Nature  
and  
Grace







sanctions the natural virtues and, by the addition of grace, carries them on to a new plane.

Of this new plane

(4) The doctrine of virginity becomes in the poem the illustration and symbol (but not the complete synonym).<sup>16</sup>

} Grace

According to this formulation, the relationship between nature and grace is to be understood in terms of the principle of progression or ascent from the lower to the higher level. The order of nature is represented by the natural virtues: temperance and continence. The order of grace is symbolized by the doctrine of virginity. The two orders or levels merge in an area common to both, which is symbolized by the doctrine of chastity. To test the validity of his hypothesis in terms of the frame of reference according to which Comus is to be read, Woodhouse refers to an autobiographical passage in the Apology for Smectymnuus, which Milton wrote in 1642 in answer to certain adversaries who accused him of immoral conduct while at Cambridge. In defending himself against these charges, Milton emphasizes the chastity of body and mind which he has preserved at every stage of his life. For "he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem, that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honorablest things - not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and the



practice of all that which is praiseworthy." Then he goes on to relate how his reading and study of the poets and philosophers, together with his knowledge of the precepts of the Christian religion, served to strengthen him in his firm resolve to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to the ideals of a pure and virtuous life:

Thus, from the laureate fraternity of poets, ripper years and the ceaseless round of study and reading led me to the shady spaces of philosophy, but chiefly to the divine volumes of Plato and his equal, Xenophon: where, if I should tell ye what I learnt of chastity and love (I mean that which is truly so, whose charming cup is only virtue, which she bears in her hand to those who are worthy - the rest are cheated with a thick intoxicating potion which a certain sorceress, the abuser of love's name, carries about) and how the first and chiefest office of love begins and ends in the soul, producing those happy twins of her divine generation, knowledge and virtue - with such abstracted sublimities as these, it might be worth your listening. . . .

Last of all, not in time, but as perfection is last, that care was ever had of me, with my earliest capacity, not to be negligently trained in the precepts of Christian religion. This that I have hitherto related, hath been to show that though Christianity had been but slightly taught me, yet a certain reservedness of natural disposition, and moral discipline learnt out of the noblest philosophy, was enough to keep me in disdain of far less incontinences than this of the bordello. But having had the doctrine of holy scripture unfolding those chaste and high mysteries with timeliest care infused, that "the body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body," thus also I argued to myself: that if unchastity in a woman, whom St. Paul terms the glory of man, be such a scandal and dishonor, then certainly in a man, who is both the image and glory of God, it must, though commonly not so thought, be much more deflowering and dishonorable; in that he sins both against his own body, which is the perfecter sex, and his own glory, which is in the woman, and, that which is worst, against the image and glory of God, which is in himself. Nor did I slumber over that place expressing such high rewards of







ever accompanying the Lamb with those celestial songs to others inapprehensible, but not to those who were not defiled with women, which doubtless means fornication; for marriage must not be called a defilement.

The general theme of this passage, as in Comus, is chastity. In discussing this subject in the Apology, Milton moves from the natural to the religious level. "Here we find him commencing on the natural level," says Woodhouse, "passing (not without aid from Plato) to the verge of the religious level, and finally moving securely thereon: we find the doctrine of continence bringing the doctrine of chastity, and at last the doctrine of virginity, in its wake, as the poet ascends from the order of nature, through an area where the two orders meet, to the order of grace. . . . Giving due weight to the direction of his 'natural disposition,' Milton tells us how he was led onward and upward, first by the writings of the poets, then by the philosophy of Plato, with its 'abstracted sublimities' (a phrase we shall have occasion to remember), and to his final goal by Christianity, its plain injunctions and 'high mysteries' (another phrase to be remembered) - that Christianity which evidently confirms, while it transcends, the dictates of natural ethics and the highest wisdom of the philosophers. . . . Continence may be achieved on the basis of natural ethics (and be taught by those good teachers the poets, though not religiously inspired).



Chastity, even in its 'abstracted sublimities,' may be learned from the wise and virtuous pagan philosophers (also poets in their way), who move likewise on the natural level but strain upward to the very verge of the religious. And these teachings Christianity by its precepts confirms. But above the natural level is the religious and there Christian doctrine is the only guide. Such is the scheme of the Apology; and, broadly speaking, it is identical with that of Comus."<sup>17</sup>

So far we have seen how Woodhouse relates the thought in Comus to the intellectual frame of reference and how the development of the thought parallels very closely the movement of ascent from nature to grace which he finds in the Apology. We must go on now to see how Woodhouse, with reference to the speeches of the Elder Brother, traces the movement from nature to grace:

(1) First the poet emphasizes the power and security of virtue in general, and in itself, without particular reference either to chastity or to anything above the natural level. "The mind is its own place," as Milton already knows. And virtue arms the mind, first with inward peace ("the sweet peace that goodness bosoms ever"), and then with inward illumination

"He that has light within his own clear breast  
May sit i' the centre and enjoy bright day."

We are to remember this when we hear the Lady's defiance of Comus: "Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind"; and once more (as we shall see) before the poem closes.

(2) Then he suggests that chastity is in very special degree a strength and protection to the person that possesses







it: a strength and protection referable (like all good gifts) to Heaven, but still the mind's own

"a hidden strength,  
Which is Heaven gave it, may be termed her own."

We are still on the natural level, but the idea of virtue's - and specifically of chastity's - ultimate (though perhaps unrecognized) dependence on God's gift is suggested. This is a point of juncture between the two orders, which permits grace to build upon nature in a way to be described in points 4 and 5; but first,

(3) the grounding of chastity, and its power, in the order of nature is emphasized by a deliberate reference to non-Christian wisdom:

"Do ye believe me yet, or shall I call  
Antiquity from the old schools of Greece,  
To testify the arms of Chastity?  
Hence had the huntress Dian her dread bow,  
Fair silver-shafted queen for ever chaste. . . .  
What was that snaky-headed Gorgon shield  
That wise Minerva wore, unconquered virgin, . . .  
But rigid looks of chaste austerity  
And noble grace that dashed brute violence . . . ?"

(4) And only now do we come to the passage to which the Lady's speech to Comus is designed to send us back:

"So dear to Heaven is saintly chastity,  
That when a soul is found sincerely so,  
A thousand liveried angels lackey her,  
Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,  
And in clear dream and solemn vision  
Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear;  
Till oft converse with heavenly habitants  
Begin to cast a beam on the outward shape,  
The unpolluted temple of the mind,  
And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,  
Till all become immortal."

Here one recognizes Platonic doctrine, the doctrine taught by Spenser:

"For of the soule the bodie forme doth take,  
For soule is forme, and doth the bodie make;"



the doctrine, also, accepted by Milton, of "chastity and love . . . : how the first and chiefest office of love begins and ends in the soul, producing those happy twins of her divine generation, knowledge and virtue." For to peace and freedom and illumination of mind on the level already stated, is here added illumination of a higher order, whose note is not self-sufficiency, but self-surrender, and whose communication is rapture. And as in the passage from the Apology, the "abstracted sublimities" (what the Lady calls "the sublime notion") of Platonism lead on directly to "those chaste and high mysteries" (the Lady's phrase is identical, "the high mystery") of Christian teaching; for to Milton, at this stage of his development, Platonism marks the highest reach of thought on the natural level and its point of juncture with the divine. But here in contrast to the Apology, Platonic and Christian doctrine merge, though it may well be (as we shall observe) that there is ascent within the order of grace and that more is meant by the Lady's allusion to the "high mystery" than is contained in the Elder Brother's exposition.

(5) Finally, the recurring idea of chastity's self-protective power receives, on the religious level, its confirmation and its explanation, in the doctrine of Eternal Providence. It is for the Christian pre-eminently that "all things work together for good." The ideas here uttered are repeated in a larger context in Paradise Lost and are a ground of the optimism which is one of its notes. Not malice, and not

"that power  
Which erring men call Chance,"

but the power and providence of God reign supreme. On this the Christian stakes everything; for

"if this fail,  
The pillared firmament is rottenness,  
And earth's base built on stubble."

The emphasis on Providence is reinforced by the presence of the Attendant Spirit, who is its minister and almost its symbol.<sup>18</sup>

A similar pattern of movement from nature to grace is seen in the speech of the Lady in the debate with Comus.







Starting on the natural level, the Lady advocates temperance against the views of the enchanter, who seeks to mislead her into thinking that nature teaches the unrestricted use and enjoyment of her bounties:

Impostor, do not charge most innocent nature,  
 As if she would her children should be riotous  
 With her abundance; she, good cateress,  
 Means her provision only to the good  
 That live according to her sober laws  
 And holy dictate of spare Temperance.

Then she goes on to speak about chastity, and the argument here moves in an area common to nature and grace, rising then, as Woodhouse maintains, to the purely Christian level in the reference which the Lady makes to "the sage and serious doctrine of virginity":

Shall I go on?  
 Or have I said enough? To him that dares  
 Arm his profane tongue with contemptuous words  
 Against the Sun-clad power of Chastity  
 Fain would I something say, yet to what end?  
 Thou hast nor Ear nor Soul to apprehend  
 The sublime notion and high mystery  
 That must be utter'd to unfold the sage  
 And serious doctrine of Virginity. . . .  
 Thou art not fit to hear thyself convinc't;  
 Yet should I try, the uncontrolled worth  
 Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits  
 To such a flame of sacred vehemence,  
 That dumb things would be moved to sympathize,  
 And the brute Earth would lend her nerves, and shake,  
 Till all thy magic structures rear'd so high,  
 Were shatter'd into heaps o'er thy false head.

The problem here, as Woodhouse himself reminds us, is that the Lady fails to make a clear-cut distinction between



the doctrine of chastity and the doctrine of virginity. The two doctrines seem to merge into one. If, as Woodhouse believes, the doctrine of virginity enunciated by the Lady is to be understood as representing the religious aspect of the doctrine of mere earthly chastity enunciated earlier by the Elder Brother, we are at a loss to understand why this doctrine is not invoked when the Lady's plight becomes known to the brothers. In the words of J.C. Maxwell,

When the Attendant Spirit has brought to the Brothers the news of their sister's plight, the younger turns to the elder and asks: 'is this the confidence you gave me Brother?' If Milton wished to stress the divine protection afforded specifically to virginity, or even to chastity, one would expect him to do so here. Instead the Elder Brother generalises: 'Vertue may be assailed, but never hurt', and in the whole speech there is no mention of chastity. Milton's method has clearly been to start from the particular instance, as in the Elder Brother's earlier speech, and then proceed to the general law it illustrates. We now turn to the Lady's first speech in Comus's palace. She lays claim at first to no special divine protection as a virgin, but puts the case on the widest possible principle, the freedom of the will: 'Thou canst not touch the freedome of my minde.'<sup>19</sup>

An examination of the passages with which we are concerned at this point reveals that the expression "Sun-clad power of Chastity" is synonymous with "the sage and serious doctrine of Virginity" (ll. 782, 786, 787), and the Elder Brother not only describes chastity as "sacred" (l. 425) and "Saintly" (l. 453), but uses "true virginity" (l. 437) as a synonym. R.M. Adams says in this connection:







Thus Mr. Woodhouse, recognizing a possible confusion, is forced to appeal "to the intellectual frame of reference, supported as it is by the autobiographical passage in the Apology" (UTQ, XI, 56). Here, it seems to me, the text is in danger of slipping away from us entirely. Valid support for ideas which are only adumbrated in a text may always be sought by appeals to related material; but here we are asked to import bodily, without any textual authority at all, ideas expressed by Milton in another context eight years later and ideas expressed by people other than Milton. This procedure seems unwarranted. Deliberately or otherwise, the text makes no distinction between chastity and virginity; when she rebukes Comus, the Lady does not describe chastity as a lesser virtue than virginity or make explicit reference to any specifically Christian sanctions for either virtue; and one reason for this reticence, aside from possible uneasy feelings on Milton's part about devotional celibacy, may be sought in the social implications of the particular masque he was writing.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the only satisfactory solution to the problem under consideration is to see the two orders as overlapping, with the elements of the one merging into the elements of the other. This view would be in keeping with Woodhouse's formulation of the relationship between the two orders as interpenetrating and sharing an area where the distinctive characteristics of each order tend to flow together. Now if we apply this idea (which may be called the principle of fusion or integration of the two orders) to the action of the poem, as distinguished from the thought, Milton may be taken as saying that the action, which culminates in the release of the Lady through the intervention of Sabrina, involves both natural as well as supernatural agencies, which work together to bring about the Lady's victory. And with this few would



disagree. However, Woodhouse goes beyond this to maintain that the meaning of the poem cannot be properly understood unless it is seen from the vantage point of grace. "In Comus," he says, "Milton does not repudiate the order of nature; he does not deny an area common to nature and grace, or the ascent through it from natural wisdom to divine; he does not seek to divorce the two orders. But he believes that experience on the level of grace will cast a light back upon nature and enable one to realize its true significance."<sup>21</sup>

However, the action of the masque clearly indicates that the Lady has come to a realization of the true significance of nature before the intervention of grace, symbolized in the Sabrina episode, to effect her release from Comus's chair. Grace is not required to save her. She has saved herself by relying on what the Elder Brother calls

a hidden strength  
Which if Heav'n gave it, may be term'd her own;  
'Tis chastity, my brother chastity.

Woodhouse does not mention the Sabrina episode in his article. However, in another essay, entitled "Comus Once More", written nine years later, he states that no interpretation of Comus which ignores the Sabrina episode can be regarded as complete. "Let me ingenuously confess," he says, "that I omitted to comment on the intervention of Sabrina because I did not then understand it, as I have long since come to do.







. . . The episode of Sabrina, properly understood, is not only consonant with my interpretation of Comus; it is essential to that interpretation. For the episode signalizes the secure achievement of the level of grace, and it is from the vantage point of grace that the Epilogue takes its retrospective view, and every good falls into its appointed place in a pattern, a vision of existence, which only the Christian can fully apprehend."<sup>22</sup>

The greater part of "Comus Once More" is devoted to the discussion of the development of the action of the masque in terms of the nature-grace motif, and thus it serves to supplement and round off the earlier article, which is concerned primarily with the ideological aspects of the poem. Because of the emphasis Woodhouse places on the Sabrina episode as symbolizing the order of Christian grace, it is necessary to view this episode in the context of the entire passage in which he discusses it:

As we look at Comus, in the light of the frame of reference and the movement of ascent, explained in my earlier article, it seems evident that the action of the piece constitutes a sort of pilgrimage, and that each of its three settings has a clear symbolic value. The Wild Wood through which the journey lies represents this world, the order of nature, where good and evil grow up together and must be discriminated by reason, and where the good, when recognized, must be adhered to by the will; for though nature itself is good, its dictates may be misconceived and its benefits perverted to evil ends, as they are by Comus, and the world thus becomes a place of danger and of "hard assays." The Palace





of Comus, situated in the wood, and "set forth with all manner of deliciousness," represents one of those crystallizations of evil, those crises of temptation, which abound in the world, good though it be, and into which through ignorance even the good may enter. Ludlow Town and the Castle, situated without the wood, and at the end of the journey, represent what another poet has called "the kindred points of heaven and home," the goal of the pilgrimage and the reward of virtue; for Ludlow, if it is the parents' dwelling, is also a symbol of the Heavenly City.

In the first setting (the wild wood), the Attendant Spirit appears, fresh from the ideal world that is his dwelling, the world where all "natures" exist in their pure and uncorrupted state; and the Spirit is the agent and symbol, not of grace in its full extent, but of divine protection and a measure of guidance. But in this setting also appear Comus and his rout, symbols of the perversion of natural goods to evil ends. There the Lady is separated from the Brothers, and, deceived by Comus, follows him, while the Brothers stay to discourse of natural virtue, of its self-protective power, of the protection which Providence affords to it (whose recognition is reinforced by the entrance of the Attendant Spirit), and of the ascent of natural virtue to the very verge of heaven. Thus the disquisition of the Brothers and the Spirit lays the necessary foundations in doctrine for the Lady's encounter with Comus and the subsequent action.

In the second setting (the palace of Comus) the Lady defends herself, and the virtues of temperance and continence, by the use of that reason of which the enchanter's "False words pranked in Reason's garb" are a mockery, and by an appeal to that nature whose dictates he wilfully misconceives. For the higher doctrine of chastity, as the Elder Brother has already expounded it, how profitless (she reflects) to utter it to Comus, who has ears but hears not! It is enough to afford to the reader a hint that will recall to him the earlier exposition. And for the highest reaches of the argument, where chastity is gathered up into the order of grace, and finds itself symbolized, but not exhausted, by

"the sage  
And serious doctrine of Virginity,"

while the Lady refers to it, one may doubt whether it has yet entered fully into her experience. Else why should she be immobilized by Comus and require (as we shall see she does) a





new infusion of grace to effect her release?

It is clear that in Comus Milton, unlike Spenser in the third book of the Faerie Queene, seeks the dynamic that is to transform chastity into a positive virtue, a principle of action, not in nature, but in grace. It is symbolized, almost indeed stated, in the episode of Sabrina (ll. 814-958). In the preceding lines (659-813) the Lady has successfully resisted the attack of Comus: she has met his argument on the natural level; she has in effect invoked the Elder Brother's account of chastity, but her rescuers find her "In stony fetters fixed and motionless," bound by a spell which she is powerless to break for herself, however firmly principled in virtue, and which requires to be reversed before she can be freed. There is, however, another way, as the Attendant Spirit (who is himself unable to break the spell) knows. It is possible to summon the aid of Sabrina. She comes, performs her task, and explains her role (908-19):

"Shepherd, 'tis my office best  
To help ensnared chastity.  
Brightest Lady, look on me:  
Thus I sprinkle on thy breast  
Drops that from my fountain pure  
I have kept of precious cure:  
Thrice upon thy finger's tip,  
Thrice upon thy rubied lip:  
Next this marble venomed seat,  
Smeared with gums of glutinous heat,  
I touch with chaste palms moist and cold.  
Now the charm hath lost his hold. . . ."

The symbolism is unmistakable. When during the fight with the Dragon (Faerie Queene, I, xi, xxix-xxx) Spenser has the Red-cross Knight stagger back into a stream of living water and come forth restored, the informed reader immediately recognizes, not a reference to baptism (as critics have too bluntly supposed and said), but the symbol for a renewed infusion of divine grace, whose imagery belongs to the same category of Christian symbolism as finds its most familiar example in the sacrament of baptism. So with the episode of Sabrina: the sprinkling of pure water, those drops of "precious cure," symbolizes an infusion of divine grace, and what is implied is the secure raising of the problem to the religious level where alone it is soluble and where alone the dynamic of true virtue must be sought. . . . That the Attendant Spirit, the agent of





Providence, should have been unable immediately to effect the Lady's release is also significant: his mission is to protect innocence and virtue in the natural order (like Arthur in the Faerie Queene, II, viii), and to afford a measure of guidance (like Una in Book I); but the operation of grace must be differentiated from protection and even guidance, as it consistently is by Spenser, and must be given its own clearly marked symbols. In this likewise Milton follows his master. . . . And lest we should fail to realize the significance of Sabrina's intervention, and the limitation of his own role, the Attendant Spirit is made to exclaim (938-47):

"Come, Lady, while Heaven lends us grace,  
 Let us fly this cursed place . . .  
 Not a waste or needless sound  
 Till we come to holier ground.  
 I shall be your faithful guide  
 Through this gloomy covert wide;  
 And not many furlongs thence  
 Is your Father's residence. . . ."

The spell is broken. Mobility is restored. The Lady is freed, by the operation of grace, to resume her journey and to make her way through the wild wood, which is the world, to the "holier ground," the Heavenly City, whose earthly image is Ludlow.<sup>23</sup>

The import of all this would seem to be that nature and grace co-operate in helping the Lady reach her destination. But nature's help has its limitations. It can go only so far and must rely, especially in times of extraordinary crisis, on the help of God. In the case of the Lady, such a crisis occurs when she finds herself immobilized in Comus's chair. And it is at this point that the decisive intervention of Sabrina is required.

But we must ask: What is the symbolical significance of the Lady's immobilized state? Obviously it cannot mean





that she has been deprived of her chastity. Throughout the entire temptation to which she is subjected she steadfastly refuses to drink from the enchanted cup, and at no time does she falter in her determination to remain chaste and virtuous. Her natural powers have seen her through the hour of trial and enabled her to overcome the temptation. In short, the Lady has saved herself, without depending on outside help, by using correctly those powers which a beneficent Providence bestows upon all, but which so many fail to use in the way they should. Consequently, they continue to travel downward towards the brutes instead of upwards towards the angels. The Lady is determined to travel upwards, and the effort required to do this in her encounter with Comus leaves her in a state of exhaustion. This, it would seem, is the symbolical significance of her immobilized condition. Sabrina comes to renew her strength, not to save her. The help that Sabrina provides is not, therefore, saving grace or redeeming grace but strengthening and rewarding grace. She comes to help "ensnared chastity", someone who is travelling upwards but who, understandably enough, finds the journey arduous and exhausting.

The ideological emphasis in the masque, when viewed in the light of this interpretation of the Sabrina episode in relation to the nature-grace motif, would seem to be not so



much on what God has to do in order to bring about the soul's ascent to heaven but rather on what the soul is able to achieve on its own. This view implies a shift in the approach to the masque from a predominantly theological one, as seen in Woodhouse, to a predominantly philosophical one, as seen in such scholars as Maxwell, Arthos, Dyson, Harrison, and Sears Jayne, who are among the most vigorous defenders of the philosophical approach. The interpretation proposed by Sears Jayne, in terms of Renaissance Platonic thought, appears to be the most convincing and merits detailed consideration.

Jayne introduces his exposition of the masque in the following way:

The philosophical meanings of Milton's Mask have not been neglected, of course, in the copious criticism of the work. Both Platonism and Stoicism are present, and both have been much discussed, but usually in terms of their classical forms. Thus Milton's Platonism has usually been discussed in terms of Milton's borrowings from the dialogues of Plato. What I mean to propose here is that in the Ludlow Mask Milton's Platonism is not classical Platonism, but Renaissance Platonism, and Milton's principal authority is not Plato, but Ficino.

The prejudices against this suggestion are extremely deep, and I must acknowledge them in some detail. For one thing, Milton nowhere in any extant work mentions Ficino or acknowledges his debt to him, whereas he cites Plato frequently. The answer to this is that just as no self-respecting modern scholar would cite Jowett in order to show that he understood Plato, though the modern scholar's view of Plato (if he is the average literary critic) is usually Jowett's, so Milton's view of Plato was probably Ficino's, though it would not have occurred to him to cite Ficino. Moreover, Milton does acknowledge his debt to Spenser, especially on the subjects treated in the Ludlow Mask, and a debt to Spenser on these subjects is largely a debt to Ficino.







Another prejudice against thinking of Milton as a Renaissance Platonist rises from Milton's own statement in the Apology for Smectymnuus, where he reviews his own study of chastity as having proceeded from medieval romance, to Plato and Xenophon, to Christianity. Milton's autobiographical statement, upon which most interpretations of the masque have rested heavily, seems to separate Platonism from Christianity, and to identify Platonism with the works of ancient Greeks only. But this statement does not mean that Milton went from romanticism to paganism to Christianity; it means only that he became learned in philosophy before he became learned in theology. At no stage of Milton's career would Platonism have been, for him, the non-Christian rationalist philosophy which most modern readers associate with the names "Plato" and "Xenophon."

Most modern readers are rationalists; what they know about Plato they have learned from nineteenth-century rationalists such as Jowett and Taylor, who followed Leibnitz in distinguishing Platonism from Neoplatonism as rationalism from mysticism. Twentieth-century scholarship, however, has shown that most of the crucially "mystical" doctrines of the Neoplatonists are present in the canonical dialogues of Plato himself, especially the Parmenides and the Timaeus, and that the old distinction between Platonism and Neoplatonism no longer obtains. But one need not prove that Plato was a Neoplatonist in order to realize that the distinction between Platonism and Neoplatonism was not available to Milton. The Renaissance did not use the term "Neoplatonism"; neither Milton nor any other Renaissance scholar distinguished Platonism from Neoplatonism. For them there were only "Platonists," the standard view being that Plato had deliberately shrouded his meaning in images and fables and that that meaning had not been discovered until later, as Plato himself predicted it would be, by Porphyry, Proclus, Iamblichus, and the Pseudo-Dionysius. Although it is usual today in literary criticism to refer to the Renaissance version of the Platonic tradition as Renaissance "Neoplatonism" (in order to indicate that the Renaissance tradition was more influenced by Plotinus than by Plato), for Milton and his contemporaries the distinctive characteristics of Platonism had nothing to do with the differences between Plato and Plotinus. The seventeenth-century reader distinguished Platonism from the other formal philosophies, such as Stoicism, Cynicism, and Aristotelianism, by two distinctive characteristics: first, it was more mythological than the others, and second, it was more Christian than the others.





If, instead of coming to Milton's Mask from the Christian doctrine of nature and grace, or from the classical doctrine of sophrosyne, one comes to it from the point of view of the Renaissance Platonist, one sees that for Milton Platonism, mythology, and Christianity were already completely synthesized, and that he was merely trying his hand at a technique of mythologized Christian Platonism which had been popular ever since the time of Ficino.<sup>24</sup>

Having cleared away certain prejudices against the idea of reading the masque in terms of the Neoplatonism of Ficino, Jayne goes into a discussion of the kind of language which Milton uses in Comus. The Attendant Spirit's opening speech plunges the reader immediately "into the mythological language of Renaissance Platonism" similar to that found in Ficino, "who set the fashion of discussing Platonic doctrine in mythological language."<sup>25</sup>

Before the starry threshold of Jove's Court  
My mansion is, where those immortal shapes  
Of bright aerial Spirits live inspher'd  
In Regions mild of calm and serene Air.

Jove's realm is the counterpart of the World Soul, the third or lowest in the Neoplatonic triad known as the One, the Angelic Mind, and the World Soul. In explaining the role of Jove or Jupiter and that of the Attendant Spirit, Jayne says the following:

Ficino emphasizes the protective as well as the directive powers of Jove and explains that his influence upon human affairs is accomplished by means of daemons, which "mix agreeably and eagerly in the governing of lower things, but especially of human affairs, and from this friendly service they all seem good; but some Platonists and Christian theologians





claim that there are also bad daemons . . . The good daemons, our protectors, Dionysius the Areopagite usually calls by the name angels, the governors of the lower world, and this differs little from the interpretation of Plato" (Commentary on the Symposium, p. 185).

This is the background of the Attendant Spirit in Milton's Mask; he is referred to consistently in the Trinity MS as a "daemon," or "guardian daemon," and we should think of him in the poem not as an angel from St. Peter's heaven, but as a Platonic airy spirit, carrying out the last stage in the process of emanation from God to the outermost circle of the World Soul.<sup>26</sup>

Jove's role is equated in Ficino's Christian interpretation of his mythology with divine providence, as distinguished from natural providence, which is normally symbolized by Prometheus.

In the Ludlow Mask Milton adopts the distinction between divine and natural providence, and he uses Jove, as Ficino does, to represent divine providence. But the Prometheus myth did not suit his purposes for natural providence, so he used a different myth for that, a myth suggested by another Platonist, Petrus Calanna. In Calanna's version, natural providence is represented by Neptune, whose authority in myth is always subordinate to and corresponds with the authority of Jove. In making everything in his masque take place in the realm of Neptune, Milton refers not only to England's insularity, but also the philosophical relationship between the realm of natural providence (Neptune) and that of divine providence (Jupiter). Since natural providence cannot conflict with divine providence, everything that happens in Neptune's realm happens under Jove's jurisdiction as well. The correspondence between the two realms is emphasized in the masque in several ways. The Attendant Spirit, for example, says in the epilogue that his route back to heaven lies by way of the ocean, and he is able to summon the river goddess, Sabrina. Moreover, the Attendant Spirit and Comus are paralleled in great detail; the Attendant Spirit does not stay to defeat Comus when he sees the girl in his clutches, nor does he himself attack Comus with the haemony. Comus, as one agent of natural providence, argues quite rightly that his functions are natural, that is, they are possible within the realm of natural providence: but a soul's rejection of him





is also equally "natural." The alternative which is put before the Lady is not a choice between natural and unnatural, but between two equally natural courses; the other victims of Comus have all chosen the fleshly alternative, but the Lady chooses the course which preserves more fully her freedom, her capacity ultimately to throw off the chains of the body and return to God. Her choice is made with the sanction of divine providence, but also, because she is still in the flesh, with the sanction of natural providence.

Thus, insofar as the masque deals at all with the problem of nature and grace, it seems to me to deal with it not in the terms of Christian theology alone, as Mr. Woodhouse has suggested, but also in terms of the mythology of Christian Platonism, as a relation between the realms of divine and natural providence.<sup>27</sup>

Jayne goes on to show that the meaning of Comus is not to be sought primarily in terms of the Christian scheme of nature and grace but rather in terms of the correspondences, worked out by Ficino, between the Christian and the Platonic ideas of the soul leaving God and then seeking to return to God. Ficino imagines the soul as originally dwelling in the presence of God in perfect bliss and contentment. Upon leaving God and entering a body, it becomes infected with forgetfulness and ignorance, which are the causes of all evil. However, the soul sees in the physical world reflections of that ideal world whence it came and is by nature inclined to return, even though the sensual forces of the body tend to hold it in bondage. But the soul is able to escape the body by reminding itself of its proper nature and its true home. Stimulated by its memory to contemplate the knowledge and





enjoyment of God it once possessed, it gradually succeeds in freeing itself from the danger of succumbing to the degrading influences of the flesh and finally wings its way back to heaven.

Thus there are three stages involved in the soul's circuitus spiritualis: the descent from heaven into the prison of the flesh, the struggle to overcome the demands of the flesh, and the return to heaven. It is the second stage with which we are primarily concerned. According to Ficino, the soul is capable of looking both ways, drawn both by love of the body and love of God. This is due to the fact that it occupies an intermediary position between matter and spirit. In order to return to God, it must therefore at some moment make a determined effort to reject the body and its demands and turn its eyes completely in the direction of heaven. By deliberately rejecting every bodily sense and desire, the soul is able to achieve chastity, and it is now ready to begin its ascent to God.

According to Ficino, Jayne goes on to say, the soul has been especially equipped to carry out its intermediary function successfully so that it can achieve chastity and thus prepare itself for its ascent to heaven. The soul consists of two parts: the lower and the upper. The lower part is the seat of the passions, and the upper part is the seat of reason



and the mind (mens angelicus). In order to achieve chastity, reason must exercise full control over the passions. But this alone will not yet enable the soul to begin its journey back to God. It must also, through the influence of the mens, be stimulated to remember its former perfect state so that it completely forgets the body and thus is led away from the flesh and back toward God. The function of reason is to eliminate the pull on the soul by the body. But the soul would remain in a stationary position if the mens did not move the soul toward God.

Up to this point we have been discussing the major doctrines involved in Ficino's conception of the soul's circuitus spiritualis. Now let us turn to Comus and see how Milton applies these doctrines. If we examine the narrative action of the masque, says Jayne, we discover that Milton has divided it into three scenes corresponding to the three motions of the soul: the descending, the stopped, and the ascending.

We first see the soul moving away from God in the physical world subject to the demands of the flesh. Second we see the soul halt its downward (or outward) motion using reason and philosophy to reach the point of no motion, the "hinge" of its career; third we see it with the help of the mens begin its upward (or inward) motion away from the flesh and back toward God. The human soul is represented in the poem not merely by the Lady, but jointly by the Lady and Sabrina; the Lady represents the Reason, and Sabrina represents the mens.<sup>28</sup>







In the first scene (ll. 1-658) we see the Lady (Soul) imprisoned in the body and lost in the dark wood of this world, exposed to dangers of various kinds, particularly the danger of succumbing to the temptations of the flesh (Comus). This leads to the second scene (ll. 659-958), where we find the Lady in Comus's palace. She has not permitted herself to become trapped into drinking of the enchanter's cup. Reason remains in control of the situation. But her rejection of Comus leads to her immobilized condition, which "represents the point of stopped motion in the emanation of the soul away from God toward the flesh."<sup>29</sup> The complete rejection of Comus, symbolized by his flight when the brothers arrive on the scene with the Attendant Spirit, is accomplished by fortifying reason with haemony (philosophy). "Only when Comus has been banished by the haemony, that is, when reason is fortified by philosophical knowledge, does the soul banish temptation entirely; at the same time the departing Comus waves his wand and paralyzes the Lady completely, symbolizing the fact that only in this final rejection, both rational and philosophical, does the soul lose entirely its motion toward the flesh."<sup>30</sup>

With the help of philosophical knowledge, then, the rational faculties of the soul are able to halt completely the movement of the soul downward in the direction of the flesh. But reason cannot start the soul moving upward toward



God without the assistance of mens, that part of the soul "in which is lodged the memory of God from the previous life before its present incarnation."<sup>31</sup> The Lady's paralyzed condition, which symbolizes the stopped motion of the soul, is overcome when Sabrina (mens) intervenes to restore mobility and start the soul moving upward toward God.

The distinctive characteristics of the mens part of the soul are its immateriality, its immortality, and its memory. Like the mens, Sabrina is both immaterial and immortal. Her immateriality she herself indicates:

"Thus I set my printless feet  
O'er the Cowslip's Velvet head,  
That bends not as I tread."  
(ll. 897-899)

Her immortality is pointed out by the Attendant Spirit, who explains that Sabrina has achieved chastity at an earlier stage of her existence, at which time, having demonstrated herself as "sincerely" chaste by plunging into a river, she was given over to the daughters of Nereus

"to imbathe  
In nectar'd lavers strew'd with Asphodel,  
And through the porch and inlet of each sense  
Dropt in Ambrosial Oils till she reviv'd  
And underwent a quick immortal change,  
Made Goddess of the River."  
(ll. 837-842)

The religious character of Sabrina's experience is suggested by the references to nectar and ambrosia, which, in Platonic mythology, meant respectively knowledge and enjoyment of God. Sabrina knows how to turn the soul toward God primarily because she remembers having done it before; the soul is able to turn toward God because it retains a memory of God from having gone through the process of achieving chastity in a previous incarnation. The nature of that process is described by the Elder Brother in terms which make the parallel with Sabrina unmistakable:







"So dear to Heav'n is Saintly chastity  
 That when a soul is found sincerely so,  
 A thousand liveried Angels lackey her,  
 Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,  
 And in clear dream and solemn vision  
 Tell her of things no gross ear can hear,  
 Till oft converse with heav'nly habitants  
 Begin to cast a beam on th'outward shape,  
 The unpolluted temple of the mind,  
 And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,  
 Till all be made immortal . . ."

(11. 453-463)<sup>32</sup>

Sabrina dwells in the regions governed by Neptune, who represents natural providence. The soul's ability to remember its original state of perfect bliss in the presence of God is, therefore, a natural ability. "Thus Sabrina, though Heaven gave her to the Lady, may be termed the Lady's own, as may all the natural powers of the soul. Sabrina does not represent the supernatural power of Grace, but a natural power; as goddess of the river she is an agent of Neptune, or a power provided by natural providence, with the permission and instrumentality of divine providence. The achievement of the chastity which Milton is talking about is the soul's achievement, not God's. Milton's emphasis is, like that of Ficino, humanistic rather than Augustinian."<sup>33</sup>

In the final scene of the masque (11. 958-975) we see the Lady and her brothers brought home safely to be presented to their parents. The soul has now reached its destination, and the circuitus spiritualis has been completed. This final



stage in the soul's ascent is portrayed emblematically in the Attendant Spirit's Platonic description of his own return to the heavenly regions (ll. 976-1017). "The Attendant Spirit invites particular attention to the symbolic language of his description of the Platonic heaven, 'List mortals if your ears be true' (l. 997). He does not mean to emphasize his remarks as a recapitulation of the earlier action of the masque. Except for the last six lines, the epilogue serves rather to describe the third and the last stage in the Platonic history of the soul."<sup>34</sup>

The last six lines (ll. 1018-1023) sum up the meaning of the entire thought and action of the masque by emphasizing the importance of loving and following virtue. The Attendant Spirit says:

Mortals that would follow me,  
Love virtue, she alone is free,  
She can teach ye how to climb  
Higher than the Sphery chime;  
Or if Virtue feeble were,  
Heav'n itself would stoop to her.

Here we have presented the moral of the whole story which Milton relates in the masque: If you wish to ascend to heaven and be reunited with God, you must be virtuous. And you can be sure that God's help will not be wanting if his help is required.

Jayne's interpretation of Comus in terms of the





Neoplatonic doctrines of Ficino is similar to that proposed by Woodhouse in that both are based on the premise that there are two orders of existence, the natural and the divine, and that there is a progressive movement of ascent from the lower to the higher order. Moreover, both interpretations see the two orders as overlapping and interpenetrating, with God and man working together in assuring the soul's victory over sin and its final glorification. However, Jayne's interpretation is based primarily on a philosophical rather than a theological reading of the poem, and thus grace becomes merely another aspect of the natural equipment which God has given the soul and which enables it to work out its own salvation. The principle of synergism underlies both interpretations, but in Woodhouse the emphasis is upon what God does, whereas in Jayne the emphasis is upon what man can do without any special help from God.



## CONCLUSION

One does not have to read more than just a few lines of Comus to become aware of the fact that in this poem Milton is giving artistic expression to some of the basic and ever-recurring theological and moral concerns of humanity. Indeed, the entire poem reflects, in essence, the fundamental conflict and tensions between the two traditionally opposed views of man and his condition and destiny: the Pauline-Augustinian view on the one hand, and the classical-Pelagian view on the other. According to the former, man is a fallen creature, totally depraved in body, mind, and will, and as such he must rely completely upon God's mercy and grace for salvation. According to the other view, man is essentially good, and by using properly the powers that God has given him, he can raise himself to God by his own efforts. In Comus Milton attempts to reconcile these two views by means of the synergistic approach. However, the kind of synergism which we see operating in the poem is clearly anthropocentric rather than theocentric. It is man, rather than God, who plays the leading role and holds the center of the stage in the "drama of salvation" presented in the poem. In the words of Adams: "The properly Miltonic mortal actively climbs toward grace,





he does not passively wait to receive it."<sup>1</sup> As Milton's whole life indicates, the ideals of virtuous living were for him a constant reminder of what man can achieve through his own efforts if he would but learn to use correctly those powers which God has given him. For Milton, virtue was an active, wayfaring, warfaring quality, a gift of God which, if properly used and exercised, provides the individual with all that he needs to overcome sin and temptation and achieve the final victory. Perhaps in no other place is this thought expressed more forcefully than in the following passage from the Areopagitica:

He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure; her whiteness is but an excremental whiteness; which was the reason why our sage and serious poet Spenser, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas, describing true temperance under the person of Guyon, brings him in with his palmer through the cave of Mammon and the bower of earthly bliss, that he might see and know, and yet abstain.

Milton's emphasis upon the ethical and moral aspects of Christianity left little room in his thinking for the



traditional conception of salvation through repentance and faith in Christ's vicarious atonement. While he probably did give intellectual assent to the orthodox position on original sin, redemption, and grace, his classical humanism led him to interpret these doctrines in ethical and humanistic terms. With his sense of the normality and rationality of the spiritual processes, as opposed to the mystical view, he could not accept the idea, expressed in the evangelical insistence upon supernatural grace, that there is no natural light left in man after the Fall. The God who formed man in his own image and endowed him with the light of reason could not have reduced him, as the Calvinists maintained, to a condition of such utter degradation and helplessness.

As a Christian humanist, Milton believed in God and in grace, but he also believed in man and in the power of reason, illuminated by Scripture and philosophy, to show him the way that leads to moral and spiritual wholeness. In Milton's view, there was no barrier separating nature from grace or reason from faith. For him, right reason embraced faith. He looked upon reason as a divine gift, a power transfused into the mind to enable man to raise himself above this "Sin-worn mold" to the very presence of God in the realms which are "higher than the Sphery chime." And this, it would seem, is what Comus is all about.







## FOOTNOTES

### INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup>A. S. P. Woodhouse, "The Argument of Milton's Comus", UTQ, XI (1941), 46-71.

<sup>2</sup>Sears Jayne, "The Subject of Milton's Ludlow Mask", PMLA, LXXIV (1959), 533-543.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 533-534, 542.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 533.

### CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>Henry Bettenson, ed., Documents of the Christian Church, 75.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I, 5-6.

<sup>3</sup>Philip Schaff, ed., The Creeds of Christendom, II, 89, 111.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., III, 493.

<sup>5</sup>A. E. Davidson, Innocence Regained: Seventeenth Century Reinterpretation of the Fall of Man, 80.

<sup>6</sup>C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love, 355-356.

<sup>7</sup>Philip Schaff, ed., The Creeds of Christendom, III, 488.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 492-493.

<sup>9</sup>A. E. Davidson, Innocence Regained, 73.

<sup>10</sup>"A Sermon of the Misery of Mankind", Certain Sermons or Homilies, 10.

<sup>11</sup>"A Sermon of the Salvation of Mankind", Certain Sermons or Homilies, 11.



<sup>12</sup>John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, I, ii, 366.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., I, i, 275.

<sup>14</sup>Quoted in Anglican and Puritan: The Basis of Their Opposition, 1558-1640, 9.

<sup>15</sup>John Calvin, Institutes, I, ii, 290.

<sup>16</sup>Denis Saurat, Milton, Man and Thinker, 14.

<sup>17</sup>Plato, Theaetetus, in The Works of Plato (trans. B. Jowett), IV, 337.

<sup>18</sup>Plato, Timaeus, in The Works of Plato (trans. B. Jowett), IV, 376.

<sup>19</sup>Basil Willey, The English Moralists, 23.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 31-34.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>23</sup>Herbert Agar, Milton and Plato, 38.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>25</sup>Plato, Phaedo, in The Works of Plato (trans. B. Jowett), III, 217, 220.

<sup>26</sup>A. E. Dyson, "The Interpretation of Comus", ES, VIII (1955), 99.

<sup>27</sup>J. S. Harrison, Platonism in English Poetry, 61.

## CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets, I, 115-117.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in The Harmonious Vision, 30.





<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Milton, Mannerism and Baroque, 20.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas B. Macaulay, "Milton", The Edinburgh Review, XLII (1825), 315.

<sup>5</sup>Walter Bagehot, Literary Studies, I, 219.

<sup>6</sup>Enid Welsford, The Court Masque, 318-321.

<sup>7</sup>J. H. Hanford, A Milton Handbook, 159.

<sup>8</sup>D. C. Allen, The Harmonious Vision, 31.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 32, 40.

<sup>10</sup>Eugene Haun, "An Inquiry into the Genre of Comus", in Essays in Honor of Walter Clyde Curry, 222.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 236-237.

<sup>12</sup>W. T. Furniss, "Ben Jonson's Masques", in Three Studies in the Renaissance: Sidney, Jonson, Milton, 103-104.

<sup>13</sup>Roy Daniells, Milton, Mannerism and Baroque, 19.

<sup>14</sup>Denis Saurat, Milton, Man and Thinker, 16.

<sup>15</sup>R. M. Adams, Ikon: John Milton and the Modern Critics, 7.

<sup>16</sup>Enid Welsford, The Court Masque, 321.

<sup>17</sup>R. M. Adams, Ikon, 9.

<sup>18</sup>M. M. Ross, Poetry and Dogma, 196.

<sup>19</sup>Kenneth Muir, "Three Hundred Years of Milton's Poems", in The Penguin New Writing, No. 24 (1945), 142.

<sup>20</sup>William G. Madsen, "The Idea of Nature in Milton's Poetry", in Three Studies in the Renaissance: Sidney, Jonson, Milton, 212.

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Madsen's essay, 211.



<sup>22</sup>C. H. Herford, "Dante and Milton", in The Post-War Mind of Germany and Other European Studies, 73.

<sup>23</sup>Roy Daniells, Milton, Mannerism and Baroque, 28.

<sup>24</sup>A. E. Dyson, "The Interpretation of Comus", ES, VIII (1955), 108-109.

<sup>25</sup>S. L. Goldberg, "The World, the Flesh, and Comus", MCR, No. 6 (1963), 65.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 65-66.

<sup>27</sup>M. M. Ross, Poetry and Dogma, 198.

<sup>28</sup>Roy Daniells, Milton, Mannerism and Baroque, 29.

<sup>29</sup>M. M. Ross, Poetry and Dogma, 198, 200.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 198-199.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 200-201.

<sup>32</sup>A. S. P. Woodhouse, "The Argument of Milton's Comus", UTQ, XI (1941), 71.

<sup>33</sup>S. L. Goldberg, "The World, the Flesh, and Comus", MCR, No. 6 (1963), 66-67.

<sup>34</sup>R. M. Adams, Ikon, 26.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 27.

### CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>A. S. P. Woodhouse, "The Argument of Milton's Comus", UTQ, XI (1941), 47.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 48-49.





<sup>5</sup>Ernst Cassirer, The Platonic Renaissance in England, 90-91.

<sup>6</sup>Woodhouse, "The Argument of Milton's Comus", 49.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Hooker, Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, I, 200, 207.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 257-258.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 258, 261.

<sup>11</sup>Basil Willey, The English Moralists, 185.

<sup>12</sup>Plotinus, The Enneads (trans. Stephen MacKenna), 63-64.

<sup>13</sup>G. R. Cragg, From Puritanism to the Age of Reason, 39.

<sup>14</sup>E. M. W. Tillyard, Milton, 53-54.

<sup>15</sup>Woodhouse, "The Argument of Milton's Comus", 49.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 56-59.

<sup>19</sup>J. C. Maxwell, "The Pseudo-Problem of Comus", CJ, VI (1947-48), 377.

<sup>20</sup>Adams, Ikon, 9.

<sup>21</sup>Woodhouse, "The Argument of Milton's Comus", 71.

<sup>22</sup>Woodhouse, "Comus Once More", UTQ, XIX (1950), 219, 223.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 220-223.

<sup>24</sup>Sears Jayne, "The Subject of Milton's Ludlow Mask", PMLA, LXXIV (1959), 534-535.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 535.



<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 536.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 536-537.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 538.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 539.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 539.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 541.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 541.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 542.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 542.

## CONCLUSION

<sup>1</sup>R. M. Adams, Ikon, 26.





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- CJ - The Cambridge Journal  
ELH - A Journal of English Literary History  
ESEA - Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association  
MCR - The Melbourne Critical Review  
PMLA - Publications of the Modern Language Association of America  
QQ - Queen's Quarterly  
SR - Studies in the Renaissance  
UTQ - University of Toronto Quarterly

Quotations of Milton are taken from Merritt Y. Hughes's edition of the Complete Poems and Major Prose (New York, 1957).

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